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Wednesday, September 10, 2008

Breaking educational stereotypes

School of choice: Parents opt to teach kids at home for growing list of reasons

Candice Williams and Karen Bouffard / The Detroit News

LAKE ORION – Lake Orion resident Sydney Forsythe wasn't pleased with how her son Noah, 8, who is developmentally delayed, was moved between mainstream and special education classes in public school. So she brought him home to teach him herself.

"He doesn't fit into the special ed cookie cutter, but at the same time he certainly doesn't fit into the mainstream cookie cutter," she said. "There's no in-between, and he started regressing. The teachers do what they can, within reason, but with budget restrictions in the district there is only so much they can provide."

While experts say most parents who homeschool do so for religious reasons, an increasing number of Metro Detroit families are making the same choice for reasons beyond the stereotype.

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Homeschooling has emerged as a growing option for families of children like Noah who have special learning needs; are academically or athletically gifted; suffer from health problems; or just don't fit the mold of traditional public schools, experts say. And with the growth of cooperative learning groups as well as support groups on the Internet, homeschooling has become a less isolating endeavor, some say.

Severe food allergies are among the reasons Macomb Township resident Kimberly Fanelli homeschools daughters Sofia, 8, and Emilia, 6. The girls have celiac disease, which affects the small intestine. They have to avoid products with wheat, rye, barley and oats -- even crumbs.

"It's more difficult to control in the traditional school setting," she said. "It's scary because their health is in someone else's

hands. At the school they were at they were doing everything they could, but there's only so much you can do."

Nationally, there is broad agreement across the homeschool community "that there are more and more people coming into the homeschool movement without a religious motivation," said Ian Slatter, director of media relations for Percival, Va.-based Home School Legal Defense Association.

The association is Christian-based, but "we're seeing people who simply want to give their children a better education. They may have a religious faith, but that's not their driving reason."

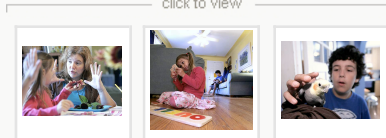
Still, the homeschool movement remains dominated by evangelical Christians, Slatter believes. He said it's nearly impossible to accurately assess how many children are homeschooled, because people tend to pull their children in and out of homeschooling -- leaving the number constantly in flux. But he estimates about 55 percent of homeschoolers are from evangelical Christian homes, compared with about 60 percent five years ago.

In Michigan, homeschoolers are not officially tracked -- although some state lawmakers want to require parents to register their homeschooled students with the state to allow for a clearer count.

For the Ouellette family of Madison Heights, religion does play a major role in their decision to homeschool. But Tricia Ouellette, who homeschools her children, Jeremy, 12, Jacob, 9, Joseph, 7, and Julia, 5, says she's found other benefits to



Tricia Ouellette, right, helps her daughter, Julia, 5, with her homework. Ouellette homeschools her children to tailor their education. (Todd McInturf / The Detroit News)



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teaching her children at home, including tailoring education for each of her children. She can also be mindful of their penicillin and latex allergies.

Jacob Ouellette, 9, relaxes for a bit before eating breakfast with his three siblings and then it's time for school -- taught by his mom, around the dining room table.

"I like it better than going to school," said Jacob Ouellette. "The only thing I don't like is the homework."

Web-based classes make it possible for competitive gymnast Caitlyn Ciokajlo, of Brooklyn, Mich., near Jackson, to study at home -- or on the road -- via computer.

Caitlyn has her eyes set on a full athletic scholarship to a Division 1 university, said her mom, Stacy Ciokajlo.

"This is as close you can be to an actual school, without the building," Stacy Ciokajlo said.

Homeschooling is not without its challenges, said Karen Selby, associate professor and chairwoman of the Department of Education at University of Detroit Mercy.

"The number one issue that faces parents on homeschooling is figuring out what's worth teaching, what's worth my student understanding," she said. To help ease the transition to homeschooling, many parents are turning to the Internet and support groups to share experiences and offer guidance.

Some groups work together to teach some of the tougher classes based on a parent's strong suit, Selby said. Other groups hire out instructors with specialties. Programs like the Enrichment Hub in Troy offer classes including American Sign Language, karate, guitar, science lab, ballet and Spanish.

The private Clonlara School in Ann Arbor operates both a private campus school that children attend daily and a homeschooling program that offers guidance, record-keeping and documentation for about 1,000 homeschoolers.

Admissions associate Karen Thurman said the number of families who homeschool their children has "exploded" in recent years.

"They're not (all) homeschooling because they have a deep commitment to a religious belief," said Chandra Montgomery-Nicol, Clonlara's executive director. "A lot feel they want the support of the school without the interference of the school."

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