

Some good reasons to drop out...

by Heidi Priesnitz

An estimated 30,000 Canadian children are being educated at home rather than at school.

Learning for these home-educated students is not restricted from nine to three, five days a week. Learning is not something turned on when teachers enter the classroom and turned off when they leave. Learning has more to do with real life and less to do with textbooks and testing. Learning is what happens all the time. Because these students are not

pressured and bored by formal memorization and regurgitation, they have remained the curious and excited learners they were as babies.

This highly individualized, home-based style of education is not new. In past eras, people like Thomas Edison and Abraham Lincoln received much of their education at home, sometimes with the assistance of tutors. Indeed, for most people, their home was also their workplace. However, with the onset of industrialization, compulsory schooling was conceived.

As society progressed and more

women joined the workforce, children were displaced from their homes at increasingly earlier ages. In many areas school systems have become so large and bureaucratic that they are little more than mass babysitters with little or no individual attention available. Rigid grade levels with age segregation and standardized testing have come to typify this assembly-line style of learning.

It has gradually become acceptable to relinquish control over aspects of one's life to "experts." We rely on doctors to keep us healthy, on television actors to entertain us, on builders to construct our

houses for us, and on teachers to educate us. As a result, people have come to feel incapable of doing almost anything for themselves.

One of the main benefits of home-based education is to empower young people, to help them learn, relate, act and live effectively — both while they are young and as they begin to deal with an uncertain personal and societal future.

Home-based learning provides children with time and space to grow and develop at their own speed, free from the conformity required by institutionalized education. The role of parents is very different than that of traditional teachers. Rather than teach, they facilitate, challenge, protect, support, model and help celebrate success.

In practical terms, this means talking with children; providing opportunities for interaction with people and things; sharing and modelling learning; supporting the risk-taking and mistake-making processes; enriching the environment with books, pens, paper and other learning materials.

Rather than taking place solely in one location, learning of this type takes place in the real world for real-life reasons, rather than in the pseudo-reality of a protected classroom where there are few consequences for poor performance.

During a typical week, home-educated children might accompany a parent on neighbourhood trips, participate in adult business activities such as working at a food co-op, attend a public political meeting, play with their schooled friends who live down the street, go for a swim with another home-educated family whose children range from babies to teenagers, attend a group skating lesson, take a private French tutorial, and so on.

Home-based education is legal in all Canadian provinces and territories. Each set of laws is slightly different in wording and practice, but in general, parents are required to provide "satisfactory" or "equivalent" instruction. Although there are commercially-produced curriculum programs available, many families put together their own, based on the learner's needs and abilities.

In addition to being a liberating experience, home-based learning seems to produce excellent academic results. A study conducted by the Canadian Alliance of Home Schoolers in 1988 indicated that 90 per cent of home-educated students who had undergone standardized testing scored above average. A recent U.S. study found that home-educated students scored, on average, at or above the 80th percentile at all grade levels in all eight academic categories on standardized achievement tests.

Some American post-secondary institutions, such as Boston University, are now actively soliciting home-educated students, based on the success of a few pioneers. One well-publicized American family has three previously home-educated sons studying very successfully at Harvard.

To understand home-based education, it is necessary to set aside preconceptions about education and look at the process as one in which a child becomes (or remains, if school hasn't conditioned away the natural curiosity about the world) an independent, active, self-directed learner, rather than a student who sits passively in classroom while someone else teaches.

Heidi Priesnitz learned at home until she entered the public school system at grade nine in 1985. Her family has been active in the promotion of home education since 1976 when they founded the Canadian Alliance of Home Schoolers, a national support and information service for home-based schooling.



...and some reasons not to

by Jill Skorochod

Fred Corbett admits that the twin dangers of conformity and lack of curiosity are present in the public school system. But he says this danger "is inherent in any large institution," and believes there is much to be said in favour of Ontario's public and secondary school systems.

Corbett should know. His 1976 doctoral dissertation outlined and pioneered what is now known as the popular co-operative program in education: a more 'open' and participatory approach to teaching the large classes of publicly-funded schools.

Corbett has been teaching for over twenty years, at both the high school and university levels. He believes that, like universities, public high schools aren't necessarily the brick walls their critics make them out to be.

"We forget that while the institution can close down a lot of options, it can open up a lot also," Corbett says.

Larry Burton, a vice principal at Scarlett Heights high school in Etobicoke, says the public school system brings students a lot closer to the realities of life than its alternatives.

"We are offering things to these kids that they would never get anywhere else," Burton declares, citing the socialization process and the wide variety of social contacts a child makes while in the system as the greatest advantages of public

schooling.

"Traditionally, people move forward in life and are subjected to some form of institutionalization in the workplace. These kids are accustomed to that. For children who are not a part of this [using home-education as an example], the effect is like being hit by a Mack truck."

A second significant advantage of public schooling is the use of pooled resources. The public school systems find it possible to offer students the time and knowledge that few parents could accumulate, as well as having access to equipment and facilities that most families could not afford.

"Home schooling is simply a financial impossibility for most families," says Burton, pointing to the increasing economic necessity of a dual income, as well as the large number of single-parent families, where no one, even if qualified, would be able to educate the children.

According to Corbett and Burton, the public education system in Ontario has made major improvements in the last thirty years. Since the abolition of standardized testing in 1965, students began spending more time developing skills and less time preparing for exams.

A new style of testing, known as "benchmarking," has been implemented as a form of sampling at various levels in the school system.

Benchmark tests are used to measure a student's life skills, particularly

the ability to function in society, in terms of dealing with people, accessing information, and making use of public resources.

While noting the virtues of public schooling, it is important to recognize the drawbacks of mass education.

"While it is possible to have creativity and individualization in a system which appears to be moving in another direction," Corbett explains, "it's naive to think that there will ever be a price-free, problem-free solution" to any institutionalized system.

"The advantages and disadvantages of home education versus public schooling will always be the mirror images of one another," Corbett says. As a parent of three, he discussed with his wife the kind of education their children should receive: home, public or private. It was as a parent, and not a teacher, that his answer was most convincing.

"It is only in the public school system that you are able to get that wide variety of creativity and stupidity, of kindness and ruthlessness, of patience and intolerance, and the whole sweep of things that make up a society. It is not being packaged for them [the students] on television — they are in it."

Jill Skorochod has been working as a volunteer teacher's assistant in Etobicoke public high schools for three years.