

Home-schooled students find academic, social success

VIENNA, Va. – Bridget Whelpley, 9, looked up from reading the morning news at the breakfast table. She caught up on current affairs as she waited for her siblings to finish eating.

After memorizing poetry, Bridget, Colin, 11, and Sophia, 7, drilled each other on French vocabulary. Their mother, Patty, interjected a few times to correct their pronunciation.

Following a read-aloud session from a book on the history of the world, they dispersed to their own areas in the house to do their assigned schoolwork.

Such is the start of a typical school day for the Whelpley children of Vienna.

Patty Whelpley started home schooling when her oldest son, Colin, now in fifth grade, was in kindergarten. Initially she pulled him out of school because she was worried about his peanut allergies. Whelpley learned about home schooling and decided to give it a try. When it surpassed her expectations, she continued.

When it comes to the alternative method of learning, the Whelpleys are not alone. Rather, they are part of a growing network of families in the Arlington Diocese and around the country who are choosing to home-school their children.

The National Center for Education Statistics reports that there were nearly 1.1 million home-schooled students in the U.S. in the spring of 2003, the latest year for which statistics are available. That was a 29 percent increase over the 850,000 home-schoolers estimated in 1999.

According to Mary Kay Clark, one of the founding members of the Seton Home Study School based in Front Royal, home schooling began in the '70s among parents who were either dissatisfied with various aspects of schools or living in rural areas where it was difficult to find transportation. In the past 10 to 15 years, however, families have chosen this method of education to build a stronger Catholic family and challenge their children in a way schools may not.

"It's nothing against schools," Clark said. Home schooling "strengthens the family and the faith," she said. "That's why people are doing it."

Critics of home schooling cite concerns that children won't learn proper social skills. Asked about this, Whelpley said, "I feel like with a little effort your kids are socialized in a different way."

The Whelpley children are not sheltered. They discuss issues of politics, volunteer in soup kitchens, visit the elderly and play with other children, home-schooled and not.

They interact with peers who are part of a home-schooling co-op, they take Irish dancing classes once a week, and they recently attended a co-op field trip to Fairfax Hospital to watch open-heart surgery.

While there are many benefits to home schooling for families who have the time and ability, it is not for everyone, said Whelpley. "I felt like God was calling us to home-school."

Marion Smedburg, a parishioner of St. Catherine of Siena in Great Falls who began home schooling her children more than 18 years ago, considers it "a good option for anyone who feels capable of teaching the subject matter, is completely excited about learning and really wants to share the joy of learning."

Smedburg has proof that home schooling works. Her two oldest children have graduated from college, another son and two daughters are in college and her 13-year-old and 9-year-old continue to learn at home.

At the Hazzard home in Arlington, Greek flashcards whizzed by as Kelly Hazzard, 9, chimed out the meaning of the word on each card. Greek and Latin are subjects for the Hazzard children, explained Mary Hazzard, who is in her first year of home schooling.

The most exciting aspect of home schooling is "learning how each of my children learns differently, what they get enthusiastic over and what they struggle with," said Hazzard. "They don't complain. They're happy and engaged."

All formal learning takes place in the classroom set apart in the family's home. "You

need to be very organized,” she said.

The children have their chores and they work together. They must be dressed and ready for school by 8:30 a.m. each day. Even though they are at home, they must have shoes on their feet during the “school day.”

“It’s hard to feel like you’re doing enough,” Hazzard admitted about teaching her children, who sing in the choir at St. Agnes Parish in Arlington and take gymnastics classes during the week.

The main concern for Hazzard and her husband, Tom, is “will my children be happy and thrive?” So far, it seems that they are.

Asked about continuing home schooling, she said, “I certainly would continue, but I’m always open. It depends, child by child and year to year.”