

home. schooling & WHY

Tapping into a national trend, these Andrews families choose to teach their children at home.

by Chris Carey

About 20 years ago, when Peggy Schnepf was seven, she and her brother and sister would hide in a pit under the steps when a car came up the lane. It might be the truant officer.

When people came into the restaurant her parents ran in Alabama, the kids hid in back. Somebody might report that they weren't in school.

But they were in school. Mom and Dad were the teachers.

"It was illegal to teach children at home then in Alabama," Schnepf said. "It was kind of scary but kind of cool, too."

It's not illegal anymore, and not scary. But it is cool. Home schooling is booming.

At least 15 faculty families at Andrews University are educating their children at home. Add in student families and the number might be twice that. There are scores more, possibly hundreds, scattered around southwest Michigan. Precise national figures do not exist, but the National Home Education Research Institute estimates that between 700,000 and 1,150,000 American children were being taught at home in the 1996-97 school year.

With public and Adventist schools doing a fairly good job, and with education professionals voicing reservations about home schooling, why would faculty parents invest a huge effort in teaching their own kids?

The short answer is that, for their particular children, they believe they can do it better. And they enjoy it.

"One of the reasons I do this is because in a few years they won't want to be with me," said Lilia Moncrieff, mother of two boys and wife of Scott Moncrieff, an AU English professor. Now they want to be with me. They want to be friends with me. They say, 'Mom! Look at this!' How can I pass that up?"

"I think our family is closer because of this," said Virginia Trecartin, mother of four boys and wife of business professor Ralph Trecartin. "My boys are together and they are each other's best friends."

"Something I'm thrilled with as a father is that through home schooling my kids know they are loved," said Peter Cooper, chair of the AU music department. "We provide for them an atmosphere in which they are free to fail, free to explore, free to ask questions without fear of rebuke or punishment or being made fun of because it might be a 'dumb' question." Cooper helps his wife, Laurie, teach two youngsters at home.

Other reasons have more to do with academic achievement, the kids' own personalities, or moral values.

Laurie Cooper's main reason is the opportunity for individualized instruction, tailored to the specific strengths and weaknesses of Audrey, 11, and Daniel, 8. A second reason is that "I love to teach. I love to learn, too. I'm having a blast."

Asta LaBianca started teaching son Erik 14 years ago

because she and her husband, anthropology professor Øystein LaBianca, felt the boy was too shy and reserved to hold his own in a traditional school. Erik moved to a regular school after sixth grade and is now a successful student at Andrews. His two younger brothers, Aren and Ivan, are in school at the kitchen counter or in front of the family fireplace.

The Trecartins, who moved this fall to the State University of New York at Brockport, started home-schooling eldest son Andrew, now 14, in first grade because “he’d just bounce off the walls” in a traditional school, Virginia Trecartin said. “He’s very active and needs a lot of time outdoors.”

They tried a traditional school for third, fourth and fifth grades, but because of homework “he wasn’t pursuing any of his own interests, any outdoor interests,” Ralph Trecartin said. Now he gets as much done in half a day as he got done in a full day [in the traditional school].”

Rob Zdor, an AU biology professor, and his wife, Barb, are newcomers to home schooling. Their older son, John, is in first grade this year, and his brother, Greg, 4, is a wide-eyed observer.

“To use a biological analogy, we believe the child’s natural habitat is the home instead of an institution,” Rob Zdor said. “We believe the home patterns the reality of the real world and the skills a child needs to learn to cope in the real world, as opposed to an age-segregated institution where they hang

love God and be committed to God, to be loyal to Him, to be a Daniel in the crowd, to stand on their own. We want them to be as grounded as possible in the values that we’re trying to teach them, so they won’t be swayed by the crowd.”

“We want them to be sensitive to the needs of others,” Rob Zdor said, “without looking just at themselves.” The Zdor boys help mop floors for an elderly neighbor and make regular excursions to clean up roadside litter.

To a greater or lesser degree, all the AU home-school parents want to protect their children from bad influences they might meet in a regular school. But they are realistic.

Asta LaBianca believes Aren, 15, could probably fit into a regular high school. “But there are a lot of things I wouldn’t want him to fit right into—attitudes that are negative to authority, negative to parents, rebelliousness,” she said.

The Moncrieffs’ boys, Robbie, 11, and André, 8, both have some experience in regular school. The parents speak well of the staff and teachers, but “we were unhappy with some of the other kids, the influence they had,” Scott Moncrieff said.

“The peers have more influence than the teacher,” Lilia Moncrieff said. “Twenty-four peers and one teacher.”

“The teachers cannot control what happens in students’ homes. So you have 25 kids who come with all sorts of ideas from home, the things they watch [TV and movies]. The home-school families that we interact with have very similar philosophies, virtually no TV watching, lots of reading. The parents stress courtesy.

“It’s not perfect, and they’re always going to be exposed [to bad influences] in the neighborhood or wherever. But we have the opportunity while they’re developing their characters to provide the best environment that we can orchestrate.

“Some of the critics say we’re sheltering them. But to me it’s not an advantage to expose them to the ugliness in the world at a tender age. That doesn’t make them better people, I don’t think.”

Someday, of course, a bike will be stolen or cruel insults will



Laurie Cooper, who teaches her own two children at home, also teaches music to Andrews home schoolers. Behind her, from left to right: Lucy Lewis, Aren LaBianca, Chloe Lewis, Byron Graves (with clarinet) and Robbie Moncrieff.

out with other kids at the same level. We integrate school and work and service, and we don’t see that happening in a lot of institutional schools.”

Barb Zdor added: “Home school allows much more time for us to influence them for the values we want to teach them, to

be flung. "The outcome of that can be traced to how you deal with conflict," Rob Zdor said, "and definitely in the family we deal with that. It's not like we're conflict-free. I think kids at home can acquire the skills of learning to cooperate and deal with people who are punching on you."

"They're going to get peer pressure sooner or later," Ralph Trecartin said. "If we can help them think for themselves, mature a little bit, maybe we can lessen the impact of some of the negative stuff."

The Andrews home-school families are not flying solo. They have built a network. Parents meet frequently to talk about problems, to exchange ideas and experiences. The kids get together regularly for musical events, educational enrichment activities and sports.

But the banter at a home-school soccer game in the Trecartins' knobby horse pasture is not like a World Cup match.

"Good kick, Mom!" one kid yelled at a game this past summer.

"Way to go, Heather!" another shouted.

"You can wear my hat if you want."

"I need a drink of water. Can you be goalie for a few minutes?"

And perhaps the most philosophically revealing: "You can't do something illegal just because somebody else did."

The game had players as young as 5 and as old as 15, along with three adults. The mix of ages appeals to home-school families.

"I think home-schooling tends to foster a kind of spectrum socialization," Laurie Cooper said, "not spending the bulk of your time with people your own age but being able to socialize equally well with kids younger than you, kids older than you, and adults."

"When you think about it," Ralph Trecartin said, "they're going to spend most of their lives interacting with adults, and adults are interesting people. If they learn that skill, the better off they are."

"Socialization is the least of my worries," Virginia Trecartin said.

"Our kids have always been around other kids. I think socialization of children is highly overrated in our society."

Home-school youngsters typically spend each morning in structured work on reading, writing, math, history, social and physical sciences, and often the Bible.

Afternoons are for field trips, recreation, service projects, and enrichment activities such as the Spanish lessons taught by Argentine-born Lilia Moncrieff or the music taught by Asta LaBianca or Laurie Cooper.

Do these kids learn as well as those in regular school? It appears that they do. Some, but not all, of the home-school mothers are certified teachers. Even though the State of Michigan enforces virtually no requirements for home-schooling, several of the parents employ the same standardized tests that are used in traditional schools. Test results put one boy in the 99th percentile in most subjects, his mother said. "Even his spelling was fine, and he's not a natural speller."

"My eighth-grade son has a better background in math than I did when I went for my MBA," Ralph Trecartin said.

Scores of companies have sprung up to help home-schoolers. Parents can buy whole curriculums, with everything from textbooks to workbooks to flashcards to tests, or they can develop their own programs. Most parents pick and choose items from several publishers to develop their own curriculum. Barb Zdor borrowed materials from a local kindergarten teacher for a study unit on dogs.

And some don't use textbooks. "We use real books," Asta LaBianca said. "They're more interesting."

"For example, we've read *Johnny Tremain*, which is a Newberry Award-winning book about the time of the American Revolution. When we did a section about Egypt and Rome we read *The Bronze Bow*. We read a lot of biographies as well, for the history. We read about the childhood of famous Americans."

All of the families borrow books and tapes by the armload from the local public libraries and the James White Library at Andrews. Books are stacked high in all their homes.

"The home is permeated with literature," said Pollyanna Barnes, a home-school mother who just earned her PhD from Andrews with a dissertation on the teaching of reading in home-schools. "If they're traveling, there's always a bag of books. If they have to go to a meeting or something, the children will be off in a corner reading."



Peggy Schnepf and her one-year-old daughter, Hadassah. Mrs. Schnepf completed elementary and high school at home before enrolling at Andrews and earning a degree in music. "It's too early to say for sure, but I plan to teach Hadassah at home," Mrs. Schnepf says.

Other subjects may present problems, however. Home-schools don't have science labs. Some home-schoolers have done experiments in Rob Zdor's biology lab at Andrews, but that exposure has been brief.

The Moncrieffs are giving Robbie some science exposure by working in shortwave radio. The LaBiancas have considered buying a microscope. Some families have frozen the bodies of animals killed on the road for dissection. Other science resources are available at nearby nature centers and at the Math and Science Center run by Andrews and the Berrien County Intermediate School District.

Peggy Schnepf, the 1994 AU graduate who had to hide as a child, went through grade school and high school at home without studying science. She worried when she entered college and had to

Support and caution from School of Education professors

"Is home schooling better than traditional learning?" Dean Karen Graham of Andrews University's School of Education answers her own question: "It depends on the school. It depends on the teacher. It depends on the home."

Specialists in the art of teaching and the science of learning support the way a group of Andrews faculty parents are teaching their own youngsters. But they raise some concerns.

"These are sophisticated, knowledgeable, educated people," AU education professor Ray Ostrander said of the Andrews home-schoolers. "Educated people know more about life experiences and how to transmit those experiences than people who aren't educated."

Educators worry more about ill-prepared parents, those who keep their kids out of school to conceal child abuse, those with a grudge against a particular school or teacher, or those who teach at home in order to spite the government—"militia types," in the words of Jeanne Morris, assistant superintendent for instruction of the Berrien County Intermediate School District.

Even though the Andrews home-schoolers don't fall into those categories, educators have some reservations.

"Whether you're a home-school parent or a classroom teacher, I want to know if you're engaging the students in interaction," said Larry Burton, another AU professor of education. Are they talking about this with anybody, are they discussing it, are they constructing meaning for themselves, are they connecting it to other things they know?

"My hunch is that some home-school parents can get things done faster because it's just fill-in-the-blanks. Mastery of basic information is important, but we have to take our learning deeper. And part of that involves interacting with other people on that content to see how they interpret it and relate it to their lives."

Most educators see great virtue in student-to-student interaction.

"Students retain 90 percent of the information that they learn from another student," Graham said. "They retain less than 25 percent of what they learn from a teacher."

"There's a group synergy in the classroom that you're going to miss in home-school," said Morris, who taught at Andrews for three years and has 20 years of experience in public schooling.

"There's a lot of good to be said about being in a classroom and learning the rules of the game of life," Ostrander said. "Those rules are very evolutionary. It's survival of the fittest. It's very competitive. You have a bunch of piranhas who are vying for the teacher's attention."

"I think it's important to be thrown in with piranhas. Unless the children grow up to be self-employed and run their own business, it's important that they learn to interact and get along. I'm not saying home-schoolers don't get this. I'm saying that kids who go to [regular] school get this all the time."

Though he acknowledges the strengths of traditional school, Ostrander also supports home-schooling. He and his wife considered teaching their ninth-grade daughter at home this year, but decided they could not commit the time that would require. Graham, too, favors home-schooling, if it is done well, but sees some perils.

"The risk of missing special skills, whether positive or negative, is higher when you limit the number of students and teachers in the environment," she said. "In a home-school setting, it is much more difficult to assess or even to notice any learning disability or any special gift or talent. You have very little way to compare one child with others."

Graham applauds the way home-schooling builds kids' self-confidence, but worries that "they tend to be a little overconfident. It's just as important to know what you don't know as to know what you do know."

"Home-schooling can create initiators, students who can lead a group, but very seldom does it create negotiators, people who can persuade someone to change his mind. They don't know how to negotiate

because they haven't had enough interchange."

Burton and Graham worry that some home-school parents may not have the breadth to teach well.

"There's a danger that we will reinforce or pass on whatever biases or weaknesses we as individual parents have, maybe a math aversion, for example," Burton said. "In the lower grades, most educated parents have a good enough breadth of understanding. But it can get kind of messy as the students move to higher grades."

"The child is limited to the scope and perspective of the teacher," Graham said. "In a system where a child experiences many different teachers, that risk is less. Some home-schooling parents are broad, Renaissance-type people who can offer the child broad interests and curricula. That can happen. But the risk in home-schooling is that it won't."

James Martz, principal of Ruth Murdoch Elementary School on the Andrews campus, believes the home-schooled youngsters would benefit from the intercultural mix of students at his school. "It would be a real addition to some of the families' educational process," he said. Some 40 percent of the approximately 280 Murdoch students come from a foreign background.

Martz also believes his school would benefit if the home-schoolers enrolled there. One obvious reason is that more tuition revenue would strengthen the Ruth Murdoch program. But more important, he said, is that "the parents identify the kids as unique in one way or another, maybe with special learning abilities or talents. It would be nice to share those talents with the whole population rather than hiding them under a bushel."

Burton empathizes with parents who teach at home partly to protect children from bad influences in school or the world, but he does not wholly agree with them.

"I would much rather have my child in a classroom with a Christian teacher who can deal with those situations from a Christian perspective than to pretend they don't exist," he said.

"Just because you keep them at home, away from kids at school, doesn't mean they're not going to hear swear words when they're seven, or hear a dirty joke from their cousins."

"While I understand [the parents'] feeling, I don't think that's a good reason for home-schooling. It's laying a negative foundation. It's acting out of fear."

Morris sees good ideas gaining ground in Berrien County public schools: multi-age classrooms, integration of subjects into a whole, cooperative learning in which pupils must work together to solve a problem, hands-on practical learning.

"Those are the things I'd be looking for if I were determining what's best for my own child," she said. "Is the school doing what it should be doing? If not, can I do it better myself? And then I'd have to weigh."

Graham believes the founding principles of Adventist education remain sound, "but I don't think we've stuck by those principles. I think we fight every year to try to untangle the bureaucracy from what we know is good education."

Graham, Martz and Randy Graves, the principal of Andrews Academy, have just joined in an effort to "reconceive the basic tenets and principles" of Adventist education from kindergarten through college, Graham said. They are looking at everything from schedules and calendars to ideas for individual learning, age-readiness learning, multi-age developmental mixtures, and students teaching students.

Will this academic collaboration mean anything to home-schoolers? "Absolutely," Graham said. "We agree across the board that we ought to be providing integrated services for all kids."

"It's not about 'us and them,'" Martz said. "It's about kids. All kids."

take a physics course as part of her music major. "I thought I'm not going to be able to do this. But I found a friend, he explained stuff to me, and I came out with a good grade. Home-schooling had taught me how to do research and what I needed to do to learn. It wasn't a big deal."

When parents hit a wall with a certain subject, they can hire tutors or call on colleagues for help. It's harder to compensate for some other shortcomings of home-schooling, such as the lack of gymnasiums, organized sports, and music and drama activities.

But the families manage. The AU home-school network gets together weekly for soccer, baseball, sledding and other sports. Laurie Cooper has organized the Berrien Strings, a chamber ensemble of about a dozen home-school youngsters who practice together regularly and perform at hospitals and nursing homes.

Music plays a big part in most home-school families. "Music teaches how practicing a difficult skill over a long period of time can build results," Scott Moncrieff said. "Over the months or years they can see how their acquired skill results from discipline and persistence."

All the home-school kids get positive reinforcement. Barnes, in her Ph.D. study, found that "all the parents praise their children a lot. They hug and kiss them. They're like cheerleaders."

A 1993 University of Michigan study of 53 adults who had been taught at home found nearly two-thirds of them to be self-employed. The researcher, Gary Knowles, interpreted this figure as supporting "the contention that home-schooling tends to enhance a person's self-reliance and independence."

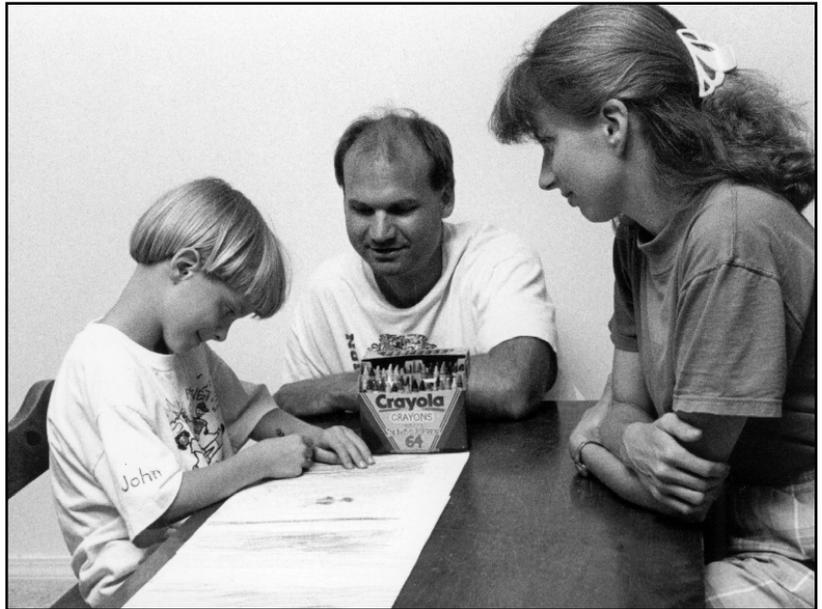
Last year Ralph Trecartin gave six seventh- and eighth-graders a taste of entrepreneurship. He organized them into a corporation that hired out to work three days each month for a Berrien Springs hardware merchant, a local tomato farmer, and some people who needed walls demolished or firewood stacked. One day a month was devoted to volunteer work, such as cleaning an elderly woman's yard. Each member invested \$6 in the company, called Wolf Prairie Young Entrepreneurs and Helpers. The company paid some modest advertising costs and bought merchandise that the hardware dealer sold on the kids' behalf. Those sales and the pay that the kids earned brought in more than \$400—enough for them to take a vacation trip to Wisconsin.

Are the Andrews home-school families turning their backs on the Adventist educational system? They say no. In fact, the parents praise the Adventist schools, and their youngsters attend Sabbath School.

"I don't want to say it [Adventist education] is not good enough for us," said Barb Zdor. "It's just that we want to have the influence on our kids right now. We don't want 20 other little kids to influence our kids."

Scott Moncrieff says: "As far as institutional loyalty goes, I am working for and dedicated to the goals of Andrews University. I try to do a good job for them. But I don't feel that that obliges me to have my kids go to school there or to the feeder institutions."

Ralph Trecartin says: "In my mind, there's a lot of good things about church schools, but if I am able to home-school, if I want to home-school, if my kids like being home-schooled, then that's my first choice because I can give them more personal attention and they can grow in a more individual way."



Rob and Barb Zdor work at home with son John.

Home-schooling is not for everyone. It takes time, patience, dedication, energy, skill, and love. If even one of those is lacking, it will not work.

And in one sense, even parents who send their kids to traditional school are also teaching at home. Asta LaBianca put it this way: "All parents are teachers of their kids. Teaching is going on all day, in the evening, at the supper table, whatever. You may not be aware of it, but when you're in the car, when you're going to the grocery, you're teaching all the time. By your example, the things you talk about, the way you answer questions, you're teaching."

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