

# 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."