

You'll love Israel from the first "Shalom."



**Introducing Tel Aviv**  
& up to 5,000 bonus miles

U.S AIRWAYS  
Fly with us

Learn more

Subscribe to our weekly newsletter: your e-mail address

[Subscribe](#)

[Subscribe](#) [Advertising](#) [About](#) [Q&A](#) [Contact](#) [Search](#) [Classifieds](#) [Pers](#)

Sections > Cover Page



## To Be or Not to Be in the Classroom?

Discussing the pros and cons of the homeschool trend

November 29, 2007 - [Jared Shelly](#), Staff Writer

As Hannah Newman typed the first few words of her novel, she started developing a story about a young girl who finds a penny on the ground. After picking it up, the girl realizes that this is no ordinary coin, but one with magical powers. Soon, a beautiful fairy appears, and the protagonist is whisked away to an adventurous world, where wings are used to roam the sky.



School is spelled out differently for kids like (from left) Carlton Lieberman, 3; Marissa Kervinen, 3; and Declan Sweeney, 4.

Photo by Jared Shelly

On her first day of writing, Hannah's goal was to complete 100 words -- not bad for any aspiring novelist, let alone one who's only 6. In the course of a month, the youngster was hoping to complete a 3,000-word "book."

At 1:30 p.m. on a recent Thursday, Hannah -- like so many other children across the country at that hour -- was in the midst of English class. Yet, unlike the majority of school-aged children in America, Hannah was the sole student in her classroom, and her assignments were not administered by a teacher, but by her mother, Lora Newman, a soft-spoken 32-year-old with glasses, shoulder-length hair and a warm, encouraging smile.

Hannah is being homeschooled, learning every day in her family's wood house set back amidst a tree-lined hill in West Chester. The Newmans decided to educate their daughter at home for a host of reasons, one of those being a chance to nurture what they saw as a gifted child.

"She's probably about three standard deviations above average," said Lora Newman, who believes in homeschooling so passionately that she and her husband, Eric, plan to do the same with their 4-year-old son Ben and 2-year-old daughter Sela.



**Jewish Career**

[Weekend Certified Nursing Assistant](#)

Gwynedd, PA  
Abramson Center for Life

[Certified Nursing Assistant & PT](#)

Gwynedd, PA  
Abramson Center for Life

[Summer Day Camp](#)

Wilkes-Barre, PA  
JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER

[Full-Time TCU RN](#)

North Wales, PA  
Abramson Center for Life

[View All Jobs](#)

[More Local Jobs](#)

[Post Your Res](#)

[Search Jobs](#)

Neither Lora nor Eric Newman were homeschooled, and both claimed they had no problems with their own experiences at school.

Eric, 33, admitted that he was somewhat apprehensive at first, since his family is doing something so out of the ordinary.

"I was only nervous because it's different, not because it wasn't going to work," he said.

Still, they did give the more normal route a try. Two months ago, Hannah woke up at 7 a.m., packed her books, pencils and notepads inside her backpack, and took a 25-minute bus ride to Hillsdale Elementary School in West Chester.

There, she sat in a class of 20 students, mostly working on topics she'd covered at home last year with her mother, leaving Hannah feeling rather bored.

"They were doing as good a job as they could. They were really trying, but you can't be as flexible at school as we can here," said Lora Newman. "She can't sit and spend a lot of time every day for a month writing a novel."

After six weeks, Hannah was back home. Now, just like last year, she is learning with her parent, instead of her peers.

Hannah, who was in favor of trying out school initially, said that the class moved too slowly for her. She said she preferred the current situation, where she and mom can dictate their own pace.

"You don't have to move on to the next thing as quickly or as slowly as the rest of the class," said the youngster.

But what about her social development? Since coming home, Hannah mentioned that she was going to miss two of her friends from recess. Will being at home hinder her socially?

Her mother responded -- like many homeschool parents do -- by stating that, simply because you're in a room with 20 or so kids, doesn't necessarily make them friends, especially when the most frequent thing a teacher seems to say is to "stop talking."

"When she's older, she's not going to be piled into a room with people only her age and expected to be interested in the same things as those people," said Newman.

### **Pros, Cons and Reasons**

Ed Collom, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Southern Maine, who has extensively studied the phenomenon, said that he finds homeschooling to be a collective endeavor. Collom, who is not Jewish but is an analyst of this type of education, earned a Ph.D. in sociology from the University of California-Riverside and has written scholarly works about homeschooling.



*Although it may look like a typical classroom, these kids are homeschoolers who gather every week at the Growing Enthusiastic Minds Co-op to learn in a collective environment.*

*Photo by Jared Shelly*



"Home-schoolers rarely teach in isolation," he said. "[They] have been very effective in forming their own networks."

Parents are often wary, he said, of who their child will meet at public school. "For parents, the motivation is all the negative stuff that occurs at school -- like negative peer influences and stories about bullying."

On the other side of the fence, Janine Remillard, associate professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, said that homeschooling could potentially limit a child's exposure to new ideas, experiences and perspectives.



*Six-year-old Hannah Newman works on an English writing assignment, but unlike most of her peers, she is taught at home by her mother, Lora.*

Photo by Jared Shelly

"Collaboration, communication and interaction are critical components of learning," she said. "These components are not easy to build into a one-on-one situation."

The number of homeschoolers in the United States has grown since the early 1980s. In 1983, between 60,000 and 125,000 school-aged children were being homeschooled nationwide, according to the U.S. Department of Education. By the 1995-96 school year, there were between 700,000 and 750,000 nationwide; by 2003, that number had reached 1,096,000.

Today, as many as 2 million children are being homeschooled, according to the Homeschool Legal Defense Association.

A common misconception, according to Collom, is that the home-school movement is driven by Conservative Christians and their ideology.

"The key is that the Conservative Christian element of the movement overall is in decline, and the new growth that you see is the fact that homeschooling has become mainstream," he argued.

In Pennsylvania, however, during the 2005-06 school year, 22,412 students were educated at home, according to the state Department of Education's most recent statistics. That number represented a 3.8 percent decrease from 2004-05, though no reason was available for the decline.

But the general growth of the homeschooling movement correlates with the expansion of the Internet, where downloading lesson plans and communicating with other home educators can happen with the click of a mouse.

One of the most popular homeschooling sites on the Web is [www.homeschool.com](http://www.homeschool.com), which offers resources and allows for social networking. The site gets around 1 million visitors every year, according to senior editor and co-founder Rebecca Kochenderfer.

"No two families homeschool in exactly the same way. They all bring their own personal style to it, and we help them find that style," said Kochenderfer. "We're educating parents

HELP MAKE GREAT MIRACLES HAPPEN TODAY



CLICK HERE TO SEND A BED NET AND SAVE A LIFE

[www.urj.org](http://www.urj.org)

UNION FOR REFORM JUDAISM

NothingButNet

Religious Action of Reform Judaism



JEWISH FEDERATION OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA

on what it's like to homeschool."

So why do parents educate their children at home?

Of parents who homeschool, 31 percent said that the most important reason they do so is because of a concern about the environment at schools, and to keep their children safe and away from peer pressure, according to a 2003 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, a branch of the U.S. Department of Education. The next most common answer given (29.8 percent of respondents) was a parent's desire to provide religious or moral instruction in addition to basic educational standards. Dissatisfaction with the academics at other schools came in third with 16.5 percent.

Concerns for safety at public schools -- especially because of recent school shootings and other forms of violence -- "cuts across all political thought," making homeschooling more of a mainstream movement, according to Collom, who does not homeschool his daughter.

Another reason parents are becoming disillusioned with the public schools, he said, is that they are "fed up" with the increased use of standardized tests imposed in 2001 by the No Child Left Behind Act.

He also mentioned that many families will choose to educate at home because a child has special needs.

#### **Studies Have Shown ...**

But are these children being educated to the same academic standards as kids enrolled in public or private schools? As far as certain test scores go, homeschoolers often point to evidence that their kids are better-educated.

A 1998 study at the University of Maryland measured 20,760 students in all 50 states on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. The homeschoolers scored in the 75th and 85th percentiles, beating out private-school students, who ranged from the 65th to 75th percentile, and public-school students, who scored in the 50th percentile.

Collom did a study of his own in 2005, examining 235 homeschoolers from Southern California. After taking the SAT-9 -- a test that's part of California's Standardized Testing and Reporting Program -- the homeschoolers earned average scores in the 54th percentile in reading, language and math. Their scores slightly beat the average student's score, which was in the 50th percentile, according to the study.

American parents who homeschool tend to be well-educated, according to numbers culled from the Department of Education and the U.S. census, with 75 percent having studied beyond high school, compared to 56 percent of parents nationwide.

Lora and Eric Newman, for example, both graduated from Kenyon College in Ohio with math degrees, then earned master's degrees at the University of Utah and Johns Hopkins University, respectively. Lora Newman, who does the bulk of instruction for her daughter, even spent two years teaching at Atlee High School and a year at Rudlin Torah Academy, both in Richmond, Va.

"It used to be that the big question was, 'How are you going to give them a good education?' " said Kochenderfer. "No one asks that anymore, since homeschoolers are winning spelling bees, geography bees and being recruited by top colleges."



*The Charity of t*  
[www.ihf.net](http://www.ihf.net)



**Subscribe to  
weekly news**  
your e-mail address

[Subscribe to  
RSS feed](#)

A 46-year-old mother of three teenage children who have all been homeschooled, at least part-time, Kochenderfer's heard all of the stereotypes. Homeschoolers are cooped up in the house all day, and without other kids to play with, they become socially awkward -- or just plain odd.

"Now the big question is about socialization," said Kochenderfer. "People have misunderstanding that they are staying home all day."

But homeschoolers take part in plenty of outside activities, she said, like sports leagues, Boy or Girl Scouts or dance classes.

One of the main reasons that the families can do so many outside activities, argue advocates like Kochenderfer, is because of the more flexible schedule. Homeschoolers get their learning done faster than at a traditional school, which is riddled with administrative issues, like passing out papers, taking roll and disciplining children -- all of which can take away from actual learning time, she suggested.

"There's only 10-15 minutes per hour that is actually focused on learning," said Kochenderfer.

Because homeschoolers feel that they can better expedite the learning process, the children don't "go to school" as long as their public- and private-school counterparts. Newman, for example, said that she teaches her daughter for about an hour-and-a-half per day, while at a traditional school, Hannah would get the same amount of work done in six or seven hours. Kochenderfer said most parents teaching their elementary-school students should do about an hour-and-a-half of school daily. For those teaching high school-aged kids, she said they should go for about four hours.

For the Newmans, the flexible schedule allows Hannah the opportunity to work on weekly Hebrew-school assignments, something that's important to this Conservative family.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics study, 30 percent of the homeschoolers polled said they did so for religious reasons.

"The beauty of homeschooling is that you don't have separation of church and state," said Kochenderfer. "You can bring religion back into education. That's a motivation for a lot of families."

She also noted that, on her Web site, a number of Jewish homeschoolers routinely log on to exchange ideas and gain resources. She even opened an online forum strictly for Jews who educate at home.

In Judaism, however, the idea of being part of a larger whole is vital. Helene Tigay, executive director of the Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education in Melrose Park, said that she hopes that Jewish homeschoolers don't forget to make themselves a part of a wider Jewish community.

"I think that a community is a major aspect of Jewish education," said Tigay. "People have to learn how to be citizens in a community; that's very hard to learn if you're isolated."

She suggested that parents check into Jewish youth groups, summer camps or trips to Israel.

### **'Great Support System'**

The school bell rang at the Growing Enthusiastic Minds Co-op, and children scurried in every direction. The little ones flocked into a small room to learn about spiders, while others headed across the hall for an art class. Older kids rushed upstairs for a lesson on physics.

At first glance, the multipurpose space inside the Faith Alliance Church in Glenmoore might look like any traditional school at 10:15 on a Wednesday morning, with artwork taped to the walls and small red chairs scattered around the room.

But a closer look shows that the children in art class range all the way from 8 to 13 years old. In addition, the physics educator dealing with the older students is not, in fact, professionally trained in science, but is a linguistics expert whose daughter is a member of the class.

For many of the kids attending the educational co-op, the setting will be the closest thing they will have to a traditional school atmosphere because the rest of the week, they're being taught at home by their parents.

But every Wednesday, from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m., eight families from Chester and Berks counties gather to teach their children -- ages infant to 13 -- in a collective environment.

Although the group meets in a church, it is nondenominational and accepts members of any religion.

Ruth Perry, one of the Jewish mothers in the group, sees it as a perfect way for her two daughters, ages 8 and 9, to meet others.

"It's just another way for them to see that there are other homeschooling families around and to get to know other homeschooling children," she said.

Perry, 43, who was born in Panama, but has lived here most of her life, said she chose to homeschool her girls partly out of religious reasons. Her husband, Mike, 44, converted to Judaism before they married; the girls regularly study Hebrew, and the couple was concerned about the lack of a Jewish presence in their school system in Morgantown.

Make no mistake about it, insisted Perry, going to GEM is about education first and socializing second.

"The kids have fun, but it's not just a play group," she noted. "It's not just kids running amuck and playing."

Each month, the co-op focuses on a different cultural theme. This month, it's Australia, meaning the science class will focus on the ecosystem of Australia, and the children read Aboriginal literature and poetry.

During the hourlong lunch period, the children are lightly supervised -- with the mothers mostly enjoying each other's company in the kitchen next door. This leaves the kids to decide, on their own, where to sit and who to socialize with during their free time. Whether they realize it or not, these homeschoolers are getting a lunchroom experience that's not much different from the environment at a public school, where kids often use this particular time to gain acceptance from peers or carve out their own social setting.

For the parents, a group-learning environment eases the strain of being a child's only

teacher and exposes them to educators who vary in style.

"It's also a great support system for the moms. We get to compare notes," explained Perry. "If we have a certain issue regarding homeschooling, or anything else, we have somebody else who's in a similar situation we are."

Organizers said they actively accept new families, but those who attend better be committed.

"We have expectations for any new mom coming in or new family coming in," said Perry. "Maybe not the first semester, but soon after, be to able to teach a couple classes."

Collom said that educational groups and co-ops help parents divide the workload, especially in areas like math or science, where they may not be as astute. He went as far as to call it the "next step" in the homeschooling movement.

But does anyone really know if parents are homeschooling their children well? Who checks in to see if parents are properly educating their children -- or even educating them at all?

In Pennsylvania, that job falls to the school district. To homeschool in the state, families must first register with the state Department of Education. The parents are then free to educate as they wish until the end of the school year, as long as they complete 180 days. By June 30, parents must turn in a portfolio of work to their local public-school district, including a list of all materials and books, a schedule, samples of assignments and a written evaluation of educational progress, according to the Department of Education.

To help guide homeschoolers so that their children can keep pace with those who do attend school, the department provides specific academic standards for students, describing some core information that they must know once they hit a certain age.

Before getting started, a family must also ensure that their children have been properly immunized, and that parents were never convicted of certain criminal offenses, deems the state.

When all is said and done, even with the amount of time and responsibility most homeschool parents devote to the enterprise, it seems that the stigma of homeschooling has yet to be dispelled. It can take the form of a comment by another parent or a sarcastic remark made in a movie or TV show. According to Kochenderfer, many people just simply don't know enough about the entire process and how much participants devote to it.

"In the media, homeschoolers are portrayed as geniuses or social misfits," she said, "but the reality is, they are just normal kids, just like everybody else."

See more articles in: [Cover Page](#)