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Columns by Rick Martinez



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Home works for schooling

By RICK MARTINEZ, Correspondent

RALEIGH -- For years I've pegged home-schoolers as either Bible-thumpers, hippies-at-heart or malcontent parents who waved their final goodbye to Big Education with a single finger. In other words, folks on the fringes. But research published in this month's edition of the journal Education and Urban Society proves home-school parents aren't kooks. And they're pretty good educators.

Ed Collom of the University of Southern Maine reports that religion, lifestyle and public school dissatisfaction have been replaced by the desire for academic excellence as the primary reason people choose to educate their kids at home. More moms and dads are becoming convinced they can provide a better education than the one delivered by the one-size-fits-all model of the public system.

Turns out they're right. For several years, home-schooled students have been scoring higher on SAT and ACT college entrance exams than their public school counterparts, according to Brian D. Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute, who wrote about the trend last fall in The Journal of College Admission. Dozens of studies show that home-schooled students are generally better prepared academically, more socially well-adjusted and tend to be more civically engaged than kids in the public system.

All this has opened the eyes of college admission officials who, 15 years ago, had low expectations of home-schooled applicants. A majority of admission officers surveyed by the college admission journal, 55 percent, said they expect such applicants to do as well as traditional high school graduates; 18 percent think the home-schoolers will do better.

Nearly every professional educator I've spoken with has said parental involvement is critical to a student's academic success. In home-schooling, parental involvement is part of the architecture. Collom's research found that the statistically significant factors affecting student achievement are parent-related. Higher-educated parents tend to produce higher-achieving students, and politically conservative parents also produce kids who scored higher on standardized tests. Parents who home-schooled their kids to take care of family and child-related needs, he found, had lower levels of achievement, primarily because this group tended to have kids with developmental problems who didn't score well on achievement tests.

Collom found that traditional demographic factors such as household income, instruction time and teaching experience had little effect on home-school student

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achievement. He was particularly surprised to discover race and class -- ready-made excuses for failure or poor performance in the public system -- don't mean much in the home-school arena. "Home-schooling apparently levels the playing field, ameliorating the negative affects that race and class subordination have shown in public schools," Collom wrote.

That fits with what's happening in North Carolina. When I asked Hal Young, president of North Carolinians for Home Education, about his group's minority outreach programs, he somewhat defensively said there weren't many he knows about. "We don't tend to think along ethnic lines. Everyone is welcome. What's important is commitment."

Ah, commitment, the key to life.

"Home-schooling is really a life style, not a teaching method," said Cindy Henderson of Granville County. She's home-schooled her seven kids for 15 years. But she cautions families considering the home-education option not to lose perspective. There times when she was more of a teacher than a wife and mother. Maintaining family balance is key, and is the subject of many workshops later this month at the home-school group's annual convention in Winston-Salem.

One thing I've learned about the home-school community is that it puts a premium on solving its own problems. That's why families ferociously fought Gov. Mike Easley's attempt early this year to transfer non-public education oversight from the Department of Administration to the Department of Public Instruction. The governor wisely backed off his effort to ensnare home-schoolers in the public system's bureaucracy and rules.

"Putting us under the same authority as public education runs the risk of disarming everything we've built," said Hall Young of North Carolinians for Home Education. "Home education is not a protest movement."

And its practitioners aren't a bunch of kooks.

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