

I'm Glad I Turned My Home into a School

By Eileen Spatz

It's September and school bells are ringing all over the county. How unusual it is for our family not to heed their call. Every year for the past seven years, we have diligently purchased our new school clothes and supplies and appeared at the school house promptly on time for that first exciting day.



Not this year. This year I have assumed the role of teacher and will be educating my children at home. Home schooling, they call it. This was not an easy decision for our family, but it was the only sane choice for us. Due to a business setback, we were forced to choose between going into debt in order for our children to stay at the private school, which they had only attended for one year, or to home school. Public school was not an option.

Why, you ask? After suffering through five years of watching my children receive very little direct instruction in academic subjects, we finally pulled the plug on our local public school. The kids were quite adept at using scissors and glue and playing games by second and fourth grade, but they were systematically being handicapped in math and reading by totally inept teaching techniques and a bone-head level curriculum. We then ran screaming to a local private school, which was, although not perfect, a huge improvement.

While my children were at the public school I was constantly frustrated by what they weren't being taught. It seemed like the academic priorities were upside down compared to when I attended public school. Common sense was not present in any of the teaching trends I witnessed in the classroom. Teachers consistently told me that my views were

passé or just glared at me with glazed eyes when I would try to share my concerns. I finally realized it was a losing battle. The teachers are being ongoingly, retrained on how to teach with the "new" outcome-based education/Goals 2000 teaching methods. They will adopt and use these methods whether there is any research to show they work or not. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that shows these methods are totally ineffective, if not destructive.

Curriculum is another issue which is being challenged by parents. An ongoing theme through textbooks of all subjects, those published after 1992, is environmentalism. Even the math books, if you can still call them that, contain plenty of environmental propaganda in them, imploring the students to "Save our planet." Isn't this a little much?

Texts now encourage group work, group projects, consensus building and cooperative learning. There is a heavy dose of teamwork throughout the curriculum and in class projects. Whatever happened to the traditional American emphasis on individual achievement?

In July, I spent six hours in a hot exhibit hall at a home-schoolers convention digging through textbooks. When I left, hungry and tired, lugging my heavy box of books across the huge parking lot, I felt the most amazing sense of empowerment. That box of books represented a feeling of accomplishment, for after all those years of questioning the material and teaching techniques being foisted upon my children -- and having my concerns ignored -- I finally had some control over what my children were going to learn.

I thumb through their Saxon math books and grin. They are black and white, no colorful photos of surfers and snow-boarders or MTV stars between the covers. No "group think" projects or "use your calculator" side bars. Just plain old wonderful math. After all, it isn't up to a book to make math "fun," it is my job as a teacher to make math interesting and understandable.

My children's readers are the original "Open Court" readers from the sixties. Glancing at the table of contents I see the author Robert Louis Stevenson, Tolstoy, Chaucer, Wordsworth, Frost and Longfellow -- and these are second and fourth and sixth grade books! This is what I consider "rich literature," a far cry from what the children are being forced to read in schools these days. And the vocabulary is to die for.

The history books I selected teach traditional American history with a proud, patriotic fervor, the way I was taught. I want my kids to feel pride and love for their country, not shame, as the new revisionist history text rampant in the public schools promote. Yes, it is important not to skip over the darker periods of our country's history, but there is also no need to emphasize them to the point of overshadowing all of the wonderful accomplishments of our nation.

What better way to spend my time, while I'm not working outside the home, than to teach my three beautiful children the things that will make them strong, independent, well educated

American citizens. My role as the mother of these children is huge already, but out of necessity it has become even larger. I cannot, in good conscience, stand by and watch my children waste their formative years wallowing in the public school wasteland. My son, the fourth grader, asked me last week if we could start our home school early. He has no idea how proud he made me feel.

**I'm Glad I Turned My Home Into a School* was originally published by the Orange County Register in September 1997. The author ended up homeschooling for the next nine years.