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School days mean staying at home

It's more work for parents, but home-schooling rolls continue to grow

By MAGGIE FITZROY, Shorelines
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One recent morning as their school day was about to begin, Drew and Josh Taylor opened their back door and discovered that their Ponte Vedra Beach yard was full of squirrels.

Acorns covered the lawn and the squirrels were leaping from nut to nut.

"It looks like they're flying," Josh, 6, said.

"Actually, there are such things as flying squirrels," said his mom, Chrissy, who's also his teacher.

Realizing a learning opportunity was at hand, she decided to begin the school day with a biology lesson on squirrels.

Josh and his brother Drew, 9, are part of a growing trend nationwide and at the Beaches.

An increasing number of parents, primarily mothers, are choosing to teach their children at home with the help of a wide variety of curriculums and materials available on the Internet, through home-school support organizations and their zoned school districts.

To provide social opportunities for their children, informal home-school groups that meet regularly are also springing up around the country.

The Taylors are part of one recently formed group, The Beaches Area Home Schoolers, whose members go on field trips together and meet once a month at various parks around the Beaches.

Approximately 1.1 million students were being home-schooled in the United States in 2003, an increase from an estimated 850,000 students who were home-schooled four years before, according to the U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Sciences.

In St. Johns County, about 850 students are home-schooled, said Robert Schiavone, the county's student services coordinator.

In Duval County, Gloria Lockley, district director of transition services, said 3,393 students are enrolled in the Home Education Program.

The trend has grown to the point where Florida school districts have programs to help parents meet the legal requirements for teaching their children.

Applying for the program is straightforward and abides by state law, Lockley said.

Parents fill out an intent form, the district accepts it, and then within a year the teacher-parent is required to send the district an evaluation of their child's progress.

During that year, school day by school day, parents have a lot of freedom in deciding how they will teach their children the requirements of their grade level.

Often, they turn to each other for advice, for company and to find friends for their children who would

otherwise meet other kids in the classroom at school.

"We've been meeting once a month to get together," Julie Braza of Atlantic Beach said one recent Wednesday afternoon when she and her children joined about a dozen other families for a two-hour picnic break at Jarboe Park in Neptune Beach.

Since May, the area home-school group has been meeting at places such as Sunshine Park in south Jacksonville Beach or Jack Russell Park in Atlantic Beach, "anywhere at the Beaches," Braza said.

"We keep growing, we are getting bigger and bigger. Every month, we grow."

"We were looking for something at the Beach," said Tracie Jacobs of Jacksonville Beach, who has been home-schooling for three years.

Jacobs had been meeting with two other home-school moms and their children once a week but she and her three children joined the larger group that day when she learned about it from a friend.

As their kids played together, the moms at the park talked about their varied reasons for choosing to teach their children themselves.

Jacobs cited religious reasons.

"I wanted my children to be able to pray in the morning," she said.

Mary Webb of Ponte Vedra Beach, who just started teaching third-grader Chadlyn and fourth-grader Hannah this year, said she likes the freedom to tailor the curriculum to her daughters' needs.

Taylor said home-schooling allows her to protect her children from potentially damaging outside influences.

"Drew has a kind, sweet personality, I wanted to be able to nurture that," she said.

He has never been to public or private school.

"This is something I decided before I was married," Taylor said. "I told my husband-to-be, 'I will home school my children.'"

The moms use a variety of techniques and materials for teaching their kids.

Some get advice and books from their school district, others use DVDs and Internet sites.

In 2006, of the 2.7 million students in Florida, 55,822 were home-schooled, said state Department of Education spokeswoman Deborah Higgins.

Many Beaches parents connect with Home Education Resources and Information, a nonprofit, Jacksonville-based organization with information and advice on its Web site, www.herijax.com, including how to have their child annually evaluated as the state requires.

Parents can choose from several options to make their child's academic progress accountable.

They can keep a portfolio of their child's work, have a state-certified teacher or a psychologist test their child with a national achievement test or have their child take a state assessment exam such as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test that is administered by the district.

Schiavone, who tries to meet with most home-school parent teachers to discuss their educational lesson plans, said parents have many options to choose from for assistance, including the Department of Education's online Florida Virtual School.

He sees advantages and potential disadvantages of the home-schooling trend.

"Home schooling, if it is done correctly, can probably exceed what a kid can get in public school," he said. "If the student is motivated and the parent is committed, it can be very beneficial."

However, "if the parent doesn't do what they are supposed to do, the student can fall behind drastically," he said. "Legally, they are supposed to send in the evaluation. Most of them send me the evaluation."

One advantage of home schooling is that academic learning can be compressed into about four to five hours a day, the support group moms said.

"Because you are not waiting for 25 other kids to finish their work, once they master a concept, we can move on and push ahead," Taylor said. "But if we need to spend two weeks on a chapter in language arts, we can do that."

Ellen DeGrafft, who lives west of the Intracoastal Waterway, began home-schooling her children when they reached sixth grade.

Her twins, Clarissa and Jessica, 16, went to middle school for a few weeks but when they came home with tales of overly strict teachers and drug use among their classmates, DeGrafft decided to teach them herself.

She likes not having to deal with "the system."

"The day I sent the paperwork in for the last child to come out of school, my stress level decreased," she said.

Clarissa said she likes having the freedom to work at her own pace. But Jessica sometimes wishes she were in school.

"Some people say there is a high-school experience" that she fears she is missing, she said.

Schiavone said while home schooling is definitely a growing trend for students in all grades, he sees it becoming more popular for high school students, especially athletes.

"They can excel at their sport because they have more time to work on it," he said, citing Tim Tebow, a former Nease High football star who was home-schooled, as an example.

Older home-schooled students are permitted to play on sports teams of their zoned schools while many younger ones join community sports teams, giving them further opportunity to socialize.

Drew Taylor takes fencing after school, something he discovered while looking up the word in a dictionary while doing a school project.

Home-schooling is a full time job, said Taylor, who doesn't know of any moms doing it who work outside the home.

One newcomer to the group that day, Carolyn Jacob, from west of the Intracoastal, said she helps run a family business "very part time" and that people tell her she's "brave" to home school her children, Timothy, 6, and Toriana, 4.

"I say, what's the worst that can happen?" she said. "They can always go to public school or private school if it doesn't work."

Socially, "you have to make the effort to get them into groups or play dates," she said. "Because you are also responsible for their social development. You've got the whole ball park."

Many of the moms said they are not criticizing parents who choose to send their children to school, but they are grateful they have a choice not to.

Eight-year-old Chadlyn Webb, who attended public and private schools before this year, said she likes

staying home.

When she's waiting for her mom to give her a test, she gets to play with her poodles.

"Before," she said, "they had nobody to play with."

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