

Home schooling grows by 80 percent in state in past decade

By Kelly Tyko

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Sara Garman doesn't have to worry about a school dress code or the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test.

As one of the 2,000-plus students on the Treasure Coast who is home-schooled, the 14-year-old feels she has more of a say about what she studies.

"I do think we learn more because we can do more things," Sara said. "It's not just about learning what's on a test."

When the upcoming school year begins Aug. 18 for Treasure Coast public schools, there likely will be more home-schooled students than ever before and the number of home-schooled students is expected to continue to rise.

For the 2007-08 school year, the Florida Department of Education estimated 56,650 students were home schooled, compared with 31,440 students in 1997-98 — an 80 percent increase.

About 1.1 million students were being home schooled in the United States in the spring of 2003, a 29 percent increase from the 850,000 four years earlier, according to figures from the U.S. Department of Education.

"We look at home schooling as a way of life as opposed to the way we educate our children," said Sara's mother, Susan Garman, of St. Lucie County.

DIFFERENT REASONS

Beth Gunsalus of Vero Beach is beginning her 13th year of home schooling. The mother of two said there are many different reasons families choose to home school.

She and her husband made the decision at the urging of their son, Neil, who was 7 at the time. They thought it would be a one-year experiment.

"I think it has been one of the wisest choices our family has made," said Gunsalus, who is the district 10 director of the state organization, Florida Parent Educators Association and represents Indian River, St. Lucie, Brevard and Okeechobee counties.

Neil, now 20, graduated from home school in May and also earned an associate's degree from Indian River State College, where he was dual-enrolled.

Gunsalus said her daughter Catherine, 16, should also receive an associate's degree from IRSC by the time she finishes high school.

"Home schooling has created a greater family unity, but it has allowed us to sculpt an education program

that's met our children's learning styles and met the desires of their hearts," Gunsalus said.

DIFFERENT WAYS

Susan Garman said the best part about home schooling is the "freedom it gives my kids to study and learn what they're interested in."

Some families opt for the traditional textbook approach, while others use the unit study approach, where instruction in several subjects is woven around a particular theme. Still others use the unschooled approach, allowing a child to pursue his or her own interests.

Garman teaches her two daughters, Sara and 17-year-old Kaitlyn, using a variety of different methods.

"We're very eclectic. I don't go out and buy a full curriculum from a publisher," said Garman, who is chairwoman of the home-school group Parents Educating on the Treasure Coast, also known as Parents ETC. "We pick and choose and use a variety of different resources."

Kaitlyn has taken classes from the Florida Virtual School, which allows home-schooled students to take classes on the Internet. She also is dual-enrolled at IRSC.

"Probably there are as many ways to home-school out there as there are people out there home schooling," Garman said.

THE BIG MYTH

Many home schooling families say a lack of socialization is the biggest myth they face when talking about their practice.

"I don't see children suffering for lack of socialization. The opportunities are out there. Parents and children have to take advantage of them," Garman said.

School district officials said they provide parents interested in home schooling with information about support groups and contact information of local experienced home educators, who can help parents who are new to home education.

Home-school groups often offer field trips, sports, clubs and cooperative tutoring in some subjects. Parents ETC has at least two field trips a month, Garman said.

The group also has a bowling league, and Garman said she hopes the group will begin organized sports activities this year.

"If you want your kids to be involved, there all kind of ways that your kids can interact with other children," Garman said. "The whole thing about socialization is a big myth."

Students home-schooled locally and

statewide since 2005:

INDIAN RIVER COUNTY

2005-06: 493

2006-07: 538

2007-08: 547

MARTIN COUNTY

2005-06: 463

2006-07: 418

2007-08: 470

ST. LUCIE COUNTY

2005-06: 729

2006-07: 883

2007-08: 1,084

ALL TREASURE COAST

2005-06: 1,685

2006-07: 1,839

2007-08: 2,101

FLORIDA
2005-06: 52,613

2006-07: 55,822
2007-08: 56,650

PROS AND CONS OF HOME SCHOOLING

PROS

- Home-schooled students consistently outperform their school peers on standardized tests.
- Home schooling builds strong family relationships.
- Home schooling allows for a great deal of flexibility when it comes to teaching and learning.
- Home-schooled students tend to socialize well with all ages.
- A child can keep in touch with old friends — socializing will just happen after school and on weekends.

CONS

- Parents have a much greater role in their children's academic life.
- Curriculum and home-schooling resources can get expensive.
- Some children have trouble adjusting from school to home school.
- There is less available free time for parents.
- Providing adequate instruction for advanced or gifted children can be difficult.

SIX RESPONSIBILITIES OF HOME-SCHOOL PARENTS

In Florida, there are six main responsibilities for parents who choose to educate their children at home, according to state law.

1. Submit a letter of intent to home-school to the school superintendent's office or the superintendent's designee, typically the student services department, within 30 days of establishing your home education program.
2. Maintain a portfolio of records consisting of samples of student's work and a log of educational activities.
3. Make your portfolio available for inspection by the superintendent upon 15 days written notice.
4. Submit an annual evaluation for each child to the superintendent on or before the anniversary date of establishing your home education program.
5. Keep your child's portfolio for two years.
6. Submit a letter of termination upon completion of your home-education program, enrollment in a public or private school or moving from the county.