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## Daily News

### Creating a class of their own

#### More California parents now choose to home-school their children

*By Lisa M. Sadders Staff Writer*

Bullying, illegal drugs and uninspired teaching at public schools have prompted tens of thousands of California parents to teach their kids at home in recent years, mirroring a national trend.

While precise figures are not available, educators estimate the number of California students learning at home now stands at about 125,000, up from about 80,000 to 90,000 four years ago.

A recent survey by the National Center for Education Statistics said the number of home-schooled students grew to 1.1 million nationwide in 2003, about 30 percent more than in 1999.

An increasing number of home-schooling associations and publications and even the Internet -- which can make learning faster and more interesting for students -- have helped more parents make the choice to pull their kids out of traditional schools, educators say.

"My son really likes math, so he's doing pre-algebra at 10. We cover the state standards, but if they want to go ahead, they can," said Renee Unger, 48, of Chatsworth, who home-schools her two children.

"I'm not stuck, and they're not stopped."

Still, despite the declining stigma of learning at home, some home-school parents face ridicule from relatives who don't think they are up to the task. Others suffer financial hardship if they have to quit jobs to teach full time at home, which can be more demanding than their old jobs.

"It tests your patience," said Karen Gelinis, 34, of Sherman Oaks, a former teacher who now home-schools her two children. "It's not like going to work -- you've got to be self-motivated and creative, and you always have to be on."

While public school officials acknowledge there are many dedicated parents capable of educating their own children, they say students give up a lot in the more isolated learning environment.

"School is a rich social experience in a lot of ways that you just don't get sitting at home alone," said Bud Jacobs, Los Angeles Unified School District director of high school programs. "Diversity is a part of this richness -- the more exposure you have to different races and cultures, the better you are able to transfer those skills to college."

But advocates of home-based education say parents frequently plan "park days" with other home-schooled children and participate in sports and other group activities to provide interaction with other children.

Erica Orosco-Cruz, 28, of Studio City has her children connected to a 16-family support group that pools its resources and knowledge for field trips and potluck dinners, a lending library, and music and Spanish lessons.

Thirty-one percent of the home-schooling parents in the NCES study said they opted for home-schooling due to environmental concerns about public schools, including safety, drug use and negative peer pressure. Coming in a close second was an interest in religious or moral instruction, which 30 percent of respondents listed as their main reason for teaching kids at home. The third biggest reason was dissatisfaction with public school instruction, cited by 16 percent as the No. 1 reason.

For Unger, the Chatsworth mother of two, it was "stupid" homework that helped pushed her over the edge. She recalled the time her son Jake, then 7, was assigned to write an essay on "what stresses you out."

Loren Mavromati, a spokeswoman for the California Homeschool Network who also home-schools her three children, said it's also easier today for parents to educate their children at home.

"With the Internet, it's become easier and more reasonable to look for alternatives to education," Mavromati said.

Parents who choose to home-school in California can hire credentialed tutors or join independent study programs through charter schools. Or they can create their own private school for their children and file an annual affidavit with the state.

But because the California Department of Education only tracks private schools with six or more students, it's difficult to say precisely how many students are home-schooled in California.

All agree the 30-year-old movement continues to gain strength. For example, Homeschooling Parent publisher Cyndi Simmons said her magazine began as a 3,500-circulation regional magazine in Houston in 1999. Today, it has a national circulation of 180,000 and recently teamed up with the Public Broadcasting Service to feature its lesson plans.

Orosco-Cruz initially enrolled her oldest son, Andrew, in a private school when he was 5. But in Andrew's second year at the school, his teacher was fired and Andrew had a string of substitute teachers. Suddenly, he was telling his mother he didn't like school and felt bullied.

"He came home one day and said, 'Mom, the other kids in class don't care about me,'" she said. "This was a school I had handpicked, so the disappointment I felt was huge, that my son was feeling that way."

After two years at home, she said, "He has a love for knowledge, he's so ready to learn, so open to trying new things."