

## Kitchen-classroom conservatives

*Barack Obama could hasten the spread of educating children at home.*



*Reading, writing and religion – Eyevine*

The first thing you notice about Karen Allen's house is that it is spotless. Even in her teenage boys' bedrooms, not a thing is out of place. And her boys, Thomas and Taylor, are polite and engaging. Your correspondent found himself being grilled about his travels by a boy who had clearly Googled him. In this household, every chance to learn something new is eagerly seized, explains Mrs Allen.

The Allens are home-schoolers. Instead of sending their children to a public (non-fee-paying) or private school, they teach them at home. They are far from alone. A generation ago, home-schooling was rare and, in many states, illegal. Now, according to the Department of Education, there are roughly 1.5m home-schooled students in America, a number that has doubled in a decade. That is about 3% of the school-age population. The National Home Education Research Institute puts the number even higher, at between 1.8m and 2.5m.

Why do people teach their children at home? Many of the earliest were hippies who thought public schools repressive and ungroovy. Now they are far more likely to be religious conservatives. At a public school, says Mrs Allen, her boys would get neither much individual attention nor any Christian instruction. At home they get plenty of both.

In a 2007 survey by the Department of Education, 88% of home-schooling parents said that their local public schools were unsafe, drug-ridden or unwholesome in some way. Some 73% complained of shoddy academic standards. And 83% said they wanted to instil religious or moral values in their children—a number that has risen from 72% in 2003.

Those who teach at home are passionate about it. They have to be: it is a huge undertaking. One parent, usually the mother, drops out of the workforce and devotes her life to teaching. The family must subsist on a single income while still paying the taxes that finance public schools. Home-schooling is not for the faint-hearted.

"It becomes a lifestyle," says Mrs Allen. She teaches her boys English, history and Bible studies. Maths comes on a DVD. When they go shopping, she teaches them economics. On holiday in Alaska, they made moulds of a wolf's pawprint, a "science adventure". Yet the Allens' science curriculum is one that no public school would allow. "We teach biology from a creationist perspective," she says.

Not all home-schoolers shun the public schools for religious reasons. Anne Mitchell, for example, pulled her son Gordon out because she did not like the way his school dealt with his cerebral palsy. Rather than helping him to do things himself, it assigned a helper to follow him around and do everything for him. A tenth of home-schooling parents say that one of their children has a physical or mental problem that the local school cannot or will not

accommodate. And some parents teach at home because their children are brilliant and public school fails to stretch them.

But there is no doubt that religion is the main force. American public schools are rigidly secular. Private schools are expensive. For parents who want their children to grow up relatively unexposed to doubt, Darwin or indecent lunchroom chatter, home-schooling offers hope. And one reason the movement is growing so quickly is that religious Americans tend to have a lot of children.

Consider the Millerds, a family of Mormons who live not far from the Allens in south-west Georgia. They have eight children. At one point, four were in public school. But when one had his head banged because other kids were fighting on a school bus and another came home "with a mouth full of trash" (figuratively speaking), Tirzah Millerd, their mother, decided to bring them home.

It was tough at first. Mrs Millerd had just had her seventh baby and her husband, a marine, was posted to the Horn of Africa. But after a while she got used to it. Now, she says she loves every minute. The older kids help coach the younger. There are lots of good textbooks and online tutorials. A local private school lets them use a chemistry lab. For sport, they play ping-pong or swim. And their father taught them carpentry when building the house.

Opponents of home-schooling—and some of them are vehement—argue that it is socially divisive. Also, since it is regulated lightly or not at all, it is hard to tell whether children being taught at home are receiving an adequate education. "Unregulated home-schooling opens up the possibility that children will never learn about...alternative ways of life," writes Rob Reich of Stanford University.

But parents make no apology for shielding their children from what they see as bad influences. They hotly deny that children learn better social skills on a school playground than at home. The children your correspondent met in Georgia were confident, gregarious and socialised a lot, albeit mostly with families doing the same thing. They were also at ease with friends of different ages. Public-school kids, by contrast, live in an "age-segregated herd", scoffs Michael Farris, the chancellor of Patrick Henry College, a Christian university in Virginia most of whose students were taught at home.

Whether teaching at home yields better or worse academic results than the conventional sort is impossible to say. Its boosters argue that one-on-one instruction helps children learn, and point to the striking number of home-schooled children who win debating contests and spelling bees. A study of 20,000 home-schooled students in 1998 by Lawrence Rudner of the University of Maryland found that they scored well above average in academic tests, and subsequent studies have found similar results. This is impressive, but does not prove that the method is superior. Parents who teach at home are deeply involved in their children's education, and the children of such parents do well in normal schools, too.

Some states try to regulate home-schooling. Twenty-six require parents to provide regular test scores or professional evaluations of their children's progress. Of these, six, concentrated in the north-east, require much more, such as the use of approved curriculums or home visits by bureaucrats. Fourteen states demand only that parents tell the authorities that they are home-schooling. And ten do not regulate it at all. Some children taught at home undoubtedly receive a poor education. But so do many children in public schools.

The movement will probably continue to grow. For one thing, it is getting easier. The internet lets parents discover teaching materials and communicate with each other, swapping tips online. They lobby vigorously against anything that might cramp their freedom. Moreover,

having Barack Obama in the White House may cause more people to pull their children out of public schools, predicts Mr Farris. Views of the government are coloured by views of the president, he says, even though the president has little control over education. And Mr Obama is far too liberal for most of America's home-schoolers.

KITCHEN - CLASSROOM conservatives. **The Economist**, New York, Aug. 6<sup>th</sup> 2009. Disponível em: <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>. Acesso em: 11 ago. 2009.

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