

# The Choices Families Make: Home Schooling in Canada Comes of Age

by *Deani Van Pelt*

Canadian parents face a variety of educational choices for their children, and a small but growing number are choosing neither public nor independent schools, but to educate their children at home themselves. Estimates based on home school support group memberships suggest that 80,000 Canadian students are educated from home. Though still a small fraction of the school-aged population, home education is catching the interest of researchers and policy makers because its results are so impressive. Study after study has shown that the “academic and socialization outcomes for the average home schooled child are superior to those experienced by the average public school student” (Basham, 2001, p. 15) at a fraction of the cost.

New research (Van Pelt, in press), the largest Canadian study on home educa-

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tion ever conducted, confirms and adds to these findings. Clear evidence is emerging that families that home educate, and their children, are flourishing academically, socially, and civically. Today, near the end of the first generation of contemporary, home-educated students, home schooling has been transformed from the choice of a few pioneering families into a movement that is leading the way in innovative educational models.

In March 2004, the Canadian Centre for Home Education, together with the Home School Legal Defence Association, will release the results of this study. This research captures a demographic snapshot of today’s home-schooling community, determines the academic achievement and life satisfaction of currently home-educated students, and uncovers some variables that appear to be associated with higher academic achievement among the home educated. Home school graduates, older siblings of the research participants, also describe their current education, employment, volunteer, and family status.



Almost 1,650 families (28.3 percent response rate) responded to a 16-page questionnaire and 1,080 students took part in the Canadian Achievement Test (CAT-3). Current home school students also completed a six-question Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1991) and formerly home-educated students, now adults, filled in the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Pavot and Diener, 1993) to determine their level of contentment and satisfaction with life.

A preview of the report reveals that the academic achievement of home-schooled students remains dramatically above the Canadian norm of the national percentile rank of 50, and the scores are consistent with previous research on home-educated students.<sup>1</sup> The mean national percentiles for the CAT-3 test were calculated for three subject areas: reading, language, and mathematics. The students scored, on average, at the following percentiles: (a) first to eighth graders in reading, 81<sup>st</sup>; language, 76<sup>th</sup>; and mathematics, 74<sup>th</sup>; and (b) ninth to twelfth graders, in reading, 85<sup>th</sup>; language, 84<sup>th</sup>; and mathematics, 67<sup>th</sup>. Several variables related to higher academic achievement scores among elementary students were discovered. For example, academic achievement rose if students had been entirely home educated rather than experiencing a mix of school and home school, if the father had participated in their instruction, or if the children watched less television.

The benefits of home education, according to this research, seem to extend much more significantly into children's lives than merely academic achievement. Although many factors influence a student's satisfaction with life, the study found that the life satisfaction of students educated at home was higher than a recently-studied group of American public school stu-

dents. Canadian home-educated children scored an average of 4.94 out of a possible 6 on the Student Life Satisfaction Scale while their US counterparts scored an average of 4.21. As life satisfaction and subjective well-being research are emerging areas of study, this finding will prove helpful for future comparisons as data on more student groups become available.

The report describes the demographics of the typical, 2003 Canadian home-educating family. It is a two-parent family with the father as primary income earner. Although mothers now contribute to the family income at a higher rate than in the past, their financial contributions are typically lower than those of mothers in other two-parent families. While, on average, most home-educating parents have some college or university education, few are certified teachers. No significant difference was found in Canadian Achievement Test scores for those students whose parents were certified teachers compared to those whose parents were not.

The study found that the most common motivation for home schooling (up to 85 percent) was to achieve superior results in three diverse areas: family relationships, the children's moral environment, and their academic achievement. A smaller majority of families (up to 55 percent) were home educating to avoid negative aspects of schooling such as safety concerns, frustrating experiences with the system, and wasted time. Less than 20 percent were motivated to home educate due to their child's special learning needs. Home educators, apparently, have vivid dreams of academic, familial, and moral excellence for their children and evidently do not view the school system as the optimum place to achieve these goals.

Contrary to a common perception that home educators insulate their children from the broader community, the research revealed that these families are well connected and involve their children in a wide variety of community activities. Over 70 percent belong to a local, provincial, or national home school support group; many belong to groups at each level. On average, home-schooled students participate in eight types of extra-curricular activities per year, an increase over findings of previous studies that showed their involvement in an average of 5.2 different types of activities. Many adults participate in the education of today's typical home-schooled child. In addition to mom and dad's direct instruction (almost 100 percent of mothers and 60 percent of fathers are directly involved in their children's home schooling), the students are involved in virtual classrooms, private tutoring, and group (or co-operative) instruction. Substantial home libraries—45 percent of families report owning over 1,000 books—are augmented by library trips at least monthly. Home-educated students are active and engaged in a wide variety of pursuits under the direction of many adults within and outside of the home.

In light of the academic benefits to and broad-based socialization of home-schooled students, the direct costs associated with this form of education are extremely low. Whether families use highly-structured traditional textbook materials or an unstructured approach following the child's interests, the median amount spent per child is merely \$700.00 per year, less than one tenth of what is spent per child by public school systems in Canada.

But what happens to home-educated children when they become adults? How do they function in our society?

This report, also one of the first Canadian studies to survey home-educated adults, found that responsible citizenship ranked high: 72 percent had voted in the last 5 years, less than 7 percent had ever collected employment insurance benefits and none had ever received any social security assistance. Over 80 percent volunteered in one or more capacities.


The home-schooling model of delivering an effective and cost-efficient education deserves the recognition of policy makers. Parents, it seems, are collaborative and capable directors of their children's education. In fact, the more involved they are, the better their children do academically. The keys to academic success in this model include plentiful parental involvement, curricular flexibility, ample and engaging activities outside of the home, limited television viewing, and an abundance of books. Home-educated students, as well as home-school graduates, report having highly satisfactory lives. As adults they participate democratically, for example, through voting and extensive

volunteering. Their educational pursuits and employment histories, combined with their lack of reliance on social assistance, indicate a healthy and contributing life after home education. Can any other education model match the cost efficiency and the academic, social, and civic effectiveness of this innovative, contemporary movement? Perhaps education policy makers should be paying more attention to the innovations suggested by this model.

### Note

<sup>1</sup>In a 1994 Canadian study, B. Ray found that students scored, on average, at the following percentiles on standardized achievement tests: total reading, 80<sup>th</sup>, total language, 76<sup>th</sup>, and total mathematics, 79<sup>th</sup>.

### References

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