

MOM SCHOOLS
The Biggest Trend in American Education
Since Home Schooling*

By Oliver DeMille**

I. What American Home Schoolers Say They Want

The biggest educational trend in the United States is the growth of alternative schools. The recent Supreme Court decision on vouchers, along with numerous state-level efforts to empower non-traditional education are indicative of this trend. But the big changes are taking place in homes and communities in California, Oregon, North Carolina, Vermont, and pretty much everywhere in between.

There are four major ways that people are deciding to do alternative schools—regularly established private schools, charter schools, home schools and what I call Mom Schools. Mom Schools are the hottest trend in current American Education, they are totally ignored in the nation's media (even more than home schooling), and they are the biggest development in American Education since home school began several decades ago. But they are not separate from home school—indeed Mom Schools appear to be the cutting edge and the future of home schooling.

It seems that private and charter schools will continue to proliferate, and that is a positive development. More, with new legislative and court support, they will be more legitimate and the growth trend of these alternatives should increase. But they are the subtrends, not the leading trend. Home schooling was the leading trend for the past thirty years, and it is now reaching critical mass. But there is something going on in home school circles—nearly all of them. Many home school parents across the United States, especially those who have been homeschooling for more than two years, are talking about setting up private schools.

But they don't mean it. They think they mean it, but the trend shows something else. True private schools are expensive; they follow the public model of grade levels, textbooks, and kids away from home much of the day; and they turn education over to experts rather than leaving it to parents and the students. Most home schoolers don't really want these things.

Still, the talk is all of private schools. What happens when it goes further than talk is nearly always the same. Here's the scenario: a group of home schoolers with a few public and private school friends decide they want a private school in their area. After lots of talk, somebody agrees or decides to set one up. The first week of class is full—mostly with home schoolers. The second and third weeks of class are even fuller, as word of mouth brings in public and private school transfers. Everyone is surprised at how many are in the class. "This is going to be great," everyone thinks.

At this point the person who has taken the risk, put in the time and set up the school is thrilled—the school is growing, the first month's cash flow is good, they think about

quitting their job (some do), and they look around for a bigger facility (some sign the lease).

The fifth through seventh week the home schoolers quit. They . . . liked home schooling. The parents liked having their kids close. The kids liked having free time and being able to study whatever they wanted. Suddenly the family feels like they've lost something wonderful. More structure sounded great, having mentors sounded wonderful, but after a few weeks they miss their family life. And their educational freedom. Parents miss their all-day interaction with the kids, and learning together.

So the person who set up the school is stuck with a few public school transfer students. If they quit their job, they need a new one fast. If they signed a lease, they'll have credit problems for years. If they signed contracts with teachers, they're really hurting. So they seek a charter if they are in a charter school state; or they go for vouchers; if charters or vouchers aren't an option, they raise their prices and attempt to become a traditional private school—but their natural market is now uninterested. So they either effectively recruit from the public school market or they shut down. Home schoolers around the U.S. today are talking a lot about private schools, but they don't stay in them long term.

II. What Home Schoolers Really Want

On the other hand, Mom Schools work. These are what home schoolers mean when they say they want private schools. Mom Schools are where a mom sees that her kids need something, so she sets it up, offers it, and invites others. I know of 5 Mom's schools in Cedar City, and I know families which have kids in all 5. Mom schools are of many types, many options. Some Mom schools are free, some cost \$35 a month for the whole family, others \$350 a month per child—and everything in between. Others have free events, fee events, and a full time price.

Some incorporate, others file as partnerships or sole-proprietorships, still others just offer an event here and there and never officially go into business. Some offer training to parents, some hold Shakespeare courses or theatre, simulations, clubs, colloquia for 11-12 year olds, a theater group, a Europe trip, etc. Or visiting lectures. Or performance groups—band, choir, symphony, dance, etc. The sky is the limit. Parents decide their children need something, so they set it up and invite others.

Experienced home schoolers may say that Mom Schools have been around for a long time, but there is a significant difference between the home school co-ops that have been around the 1960s and 70s, and Mom Schools. First, co-ops have tended to be run by committee while Mom Schools are owned. The difference in quality is significant when some one is in charge. Secondly, co-ops have tended to serve mainly as social entities, providing valuable emotional support for home schooling parents and social activities for the kids. Mom Schools tend toward focused academics. Finally, because of their very nature co-ops have been limited—most of them meet once a week or less, and the depth of the academic offerings have tended to be shallow. Mom Schools meet according to the needs of the students, and most Mom Schools tend to focus on one or a few areas of expertise. A network of such schools in an area provides a much deeper academic offering than the traditional co-ops.

I call them Mom Schools because of the hundred or so I know, only a few are initiated by Dad. But in many of them Dad is partially or very closely involved.

Mom Schools incorporate offerings from Distance Schools, Virtual Schools, Correspondence Courses, Curriculum, Montessori, Charlotte Mason, Robinson, Unschooling, Unit Study, College Courses, etc. Parents simply look for what is best for their students and then help provide it.

This trend shows that thousands of Americans not only believe in freedom, free thinking and a better educational model, but also that the entrepreneurial spirit is well and strong in America. Most importantly, Americans still have initiative—which is drummed out of so many in the public schools and is so often missing in the public debate.

III. Mom Schools and the Future of America

When home schooling first appeared on the scene, the education "experts" predicted that it wouldn't last. Later they admitted that home schooling was spreading, but thought that it would lead to more charter and private schooling and then disappear. But today the opposite seems true, the more people get a taste of home schooling, the more they like it.

Charter and voucher laws are spreading, and private schools are proliferating. But the real trend of the decades ahead is Mom Schools. Home schoolers do want outside involvement, but they also want to be home schoolers—and they have learned that they can just do it themselves.

The most exciting thing about Mom Schools may be that they promise not only a better education for the rising generation, but they are also educating the parent's generation in neighborhood after neighborhood across America. It is inevitable that this will impact our freedoms, our national prosperity, and our future.

In short, something truly amazing is happening in America. It is happening quietly, usually in small groups in unconnected neighborhoods. It is uncoordinated and mostly unorganized. Yet I believe it will shape the 21st Century. In the year 2100, it may well stand out as one of the most important trends of the century. It is quiet, it is spreading, and it is real: American Mothers are seeing a need and filling it—themselves.

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