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More parents teaching their kids at home

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Andrea Lockard was fed up with the public and charter schools her son attended, so she decided to teach him herself. But the task was daunting and the dozens of available home-school programs made it hard to choose.

"I had no idea what to do or expect," says the Monroe resident.

Two years later, she says, her son, a seventh-grader, is making A's and B's at home.

Lockard is part of a growing number of parents in Union and Mecklenburg counties who have pulled their children out of public and private schools to teach them at home. Statistics show the numbers are climbing, and area home-school support groups say they've noticed a jump in membership.

Enrollment in Union County's home schools has more than quadrupled in the past seven years, from 559 students during the 2000-01 year to 2,433 in 2006-07, according to estimates from the state's Division of Non-Public Education.

Mecklenburg County in the same period went from 1,500 students to 5,892.

Some say these estimates are low because parents aren't required to register students until 7, and some start home schooling earlier.

Home schools must register with the state. Like public school students, they must attend for 180 days and take standardized tests.

Union County's home-school growth mirrors a statewide trend. The state's number of home-schoolers has grown about 6 percent to 9 percent annually during the last decade, according to Raleigh-based North Carolinians for Home Education, a volunteer organization that supports home schools.

Parents say reasons for home schooling their kids vary as much as the dozens of teaching programs available to them.

Some do it for religious reasons. Parents like the freedom to teach faith as a curriculum subject.

Of the estimated 68,707 home-schoolers enrolled statewide, 67 percent are in home schools with religious themes, according to the state's 2006-07 report.

Others, like Lockard, are dissatisfied with public and private education options.

Other reasons include:

- Flexibility. They set their own hours. So it's easier to take field trips with the entire family and schedule those orthodontist and doctor appointments.
- Disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities such as autism say they can better accommodate their needs.
- Socialization. Some say home schools -- through outings and volunteer work -- better prepare children for "real world" situations.
- Popularity. Parents say museums, zoos and science centers are now so accustomed to home-schoolers that many offer discounts.

And that's a big help, said parent Stephanie Shafer, since most home schooling families are one-income households, with a parent staying home to teach.

Starting a home school is easy, but parents caution newbies to do some research.

Before she started, Lockard perused Web sites and joined the Matthews Area Secular Co-op, a support group for home-schooling parents, of which her friend Keith Holmes is a member.

Holmes, who lives in Waxhaw, said he joined because the Union County groups he looked at were Christian-based, and he wanted his daughter to interact with children of different religions.

The Matthews co-op is one of many area groups offering academic programs and activities for home-schooling families. Another is Parents As Teachers @ Home, whose membership blossomed from

seven families when it formed in Lake Park in 2001 to 40 families today.

A great way to navigate the available teaching materials is to join a group and learn from veterans, said Patti Fix, director of the Parents As Teachers group.

While getting started is simple, running a home school is time consuming and costly due to lost income, says Waxhaw's Keith Holmes.

"It's not an easy thing to do," he says. "You have to educate your child, and you have no one else to blame."

Thinking about home school?

State law does not require parents to be certified to teach their children. Here are some online resources to help get started:

- N.C.'s Division of Non-Public Education, which governs home schools: www.ncdnpe.org
- Charlotte Home Educators Association: cheaonline.com
- North Carolinians for Home Education: www.nche.com, among lots of other information, you'll find lists of support groups in your area.
- Classical Conversations: www.classicalconversations.com
- Matthews Area Secular Co-op, an organization for support, educational opportunities, and social activities of home-school students and their families in Mecklenburg and Union counties: www.maschomeschoolers.org
- Parents As Teachers @ Home: www.pathnc.org