

Hear Ye, Hear Ye...

On September 18th, 2006, The Master's Academy of Fine arts was the headlining article on the front page of the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Read the full article below.

Homeschooled pupils find plenty of lessons

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Geeky. Sheltered. Awkward in social situations.

Not these home schoolers.

NICK ARROYO/AJC
(ENLARGE)

Bethany Hicks (left) and Anna Clack sing during last week's rehearsal of a Master's Academy elementary choir.

NICK ARROYO/AJC
(ENLARGE)

Home school students (front row from left) Kristal Trauthwein and Kelsey Whitted and (back row) Sean Reeder, Mary Peacock and Daniel Phillips pretend to row during acting class.

NICK ARROYO/AJC
(ENLARGE)

Home school student Seth Sullivan takes a guitar lesson from Matthew McMichael at the Master's Academy of Fine Arts at Yellow River Baptist Church in Lilburn. Electives and athletics have become widely available to students outside traditional schools.

NICK ARROYO/AJC
(ENLARGE)

Jeanette Patton auditions for the part of the Queen in the production of 'Once Upon a Mattress' at the Masters Academy of Fine Arts at Yellow River Baptist Church in Lilburn.

Home school parents who want a well-rounded education for their kids are pushing them out of the nest to learn, mingle and become more mainstream. Their efforts address a long-standing concern about how well-balanced a home school education can be.

That means some home school students sit in real classrooms to take electives. They star in school musicals. They earn varsity letters for athletics. A few even get crowned prom queen.

Home school mother and teacher Stormy Johnson of McDonough makes sure her two children get exposed to the world outside their front door each week. Last week, their home school science club took a field trip to the Georgia Bureau of Investigation.

"If I did everything that was available to my children in home school, we wouldn't get our work done," she said. "It would be car school."

Parents who once objected to the solitary nature of teaching at home are beginning to reconsider as enrichment and socializing opportunities increase. Officials with the Georgia Home Education Association say that interest is spurring growth in home schooling.

Georgia's home school student population nearly doubled in five years from about 19,000 in the 2000-01 school year to about 37,000 last year, according to the state Department of Education. (There are nearly 1.6 million school-age children in Georgia.)

Home school networks in metro Atlanta welcome newcomers with Web sites and newsletters listing classes, book sales and social activities like proms and graduations.

"We have just about everything there is to be offered out there — spelling bees, geography bees, sports teams," said Charlene Peavy, a GHEA board member.

According to the home education research institute, most home school families spend between \$400 and \$600 on curriculum needs per child each year.

Once a week, Johnson can leave the teaching to someone else. She takes her kids to The Master's Academy of Fine Arts in Covington for electives. Her 12-year-old, Whitney, is studying German, animation, history and the arts there. Her 7-year-old, Collin, is in percussion ensemble and the reading club. Both will try out for the school play, "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe."

The Master's Academy of Fine Arts, which attracts hundreds of students to its 10 Georgia locations, offers home schoolers teachers with degrees as well as classroom settings.

Although the program mostly sets up shop in church social halls once a week, it has the feel of a mainstream campus, complete with stern looks from teachers. Last week at the Covington school, a pair of red-cheeked sisters filed into computer animation class tardy on the first day of the course.

The oldest, an eighth-grader, carried a Scooby-Doo book bag. Her sister, a seventh-grader, trailed behind.

"Y'all were in Spanish. That's why you were late?" the teacher asked.

The girls, who are in seventh and eighth grades, nodded.

As such activities increase, home schooling is growing across the nation. The institute reports that between 1.9 million and 2.4 million k-12 students were home educated last school year. A study by the U.S. Department of Education listed that figure as 1.1 million in 2001.

"It is much more likely that any given American will bump into a home schooler or a home school family because there are more organizational structures that support [home schooling]," said Brian Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute.

The increase in outside activities is attracting a wider variety of parents, Ray said, jokingly making reference to home school stereotypes.

"If we go back 14 to 20 years ago, if you home schooled you were either right-wing-Christian-fundamentalist-Bible-thumper or you were a move-to-the-country, granola-eating-Birkenstock-wearing-goat herder."

Child psychologist David Cantor says it's important for home school parents to provide their children with adequate social interaction.

"For any child, if you deliberately shelter them and they don't have the opportunity to interact with peers it's going to impact their socialization," said Cantor, president of Psychological Sciences Institute of Duluth.

Debbie and Jeff Howard of LaGrange sent their son Joshua on a mission trip to Brazil for four weeks to build homes for the homeless as part of a social studies lesson. He was 14.

"We never home schooled to isolate our child," said Debbie Howard. "We always wanted him exposed to things outside of home. We just wanted to direct his education."

By his junior year, Joshua spent some school days building homes with Habitat for Humanity as an outside elective.

He logged 100 hours of community service, enough to earn him the Congressional Award. He also played sports.

Some athletic programs cater to home schooled kids.

The Georgia Football League provides gridiron action for home school boys. The Thunderbolts cross-country team has won state championships, said Esther Clark, a founding coach. The Greater Gwinnett Christian Barons, founded in 1993, has team members who have traveled from as far away as Alabama to play on its baseball, basketball and softball teams.

"We have a pitcher who got a full scholarship at Georgia State University," said Mark Davis of Fayetteville, organization president.

Adding outside experience has proved successful for other students, too. The Howards' son Joshua got a full ride to Asbury College in Kentucky. He received the presidential scholarship and a tennis scholarship.

Stephanie Laubscher, 19, of Duluth, a 2005 home school prom queen, is studying the arts at Oglethorpe University. After spending years performing in musicals and taking arts electives at Master's Academy, she decided to study the discipline in college.

Home school graduate Sara Larios, 26, of Decatur, became a lawyer for the Georgia House after her mother got her involved in TeenPact, a program that exposes Christian students to state government.

"It was school for a week, but school at the state Capitol," Larios said. "I loved the environment."

Her senior year, she spent some school days working as a legislative aide.

Soon after, her younger sister, Rachel, followed her lead.

After graduation, Rachel also landed a job at the state Legislature. She now works in federal affairs at Gov. Sonny Perdue's Washington office. (The Perdues were home school parents once, too.)

"It is a nice surprise how well they have been able to do," said Carolyn Larios, mother of seven. "When you home school, you are not locked into only studying certain things.

"You have the freedom to explore and get involved in what your kids are interested in."

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