



Ryan Stephanik, center, works on a homeschool lesson with her daughter; Evelyn, 7, left, as her other daughter, Phoebe, 4, works on a different assignment at their home in La Verne.

HOMESCHOOLING

NEVER GOING BACK

SOME PARENTS ARE FINDING A LONG-TERM SOLUTION WITH AT-HOME LEARNING

BY MEGAN JAMERSON

Ryan Stephanik's 7-year-old daughter squeezes a handful of green slime before sharing over Zoom that the title of her short story is "The Wizard and the Boy."

The goal was to try writing a single paragraph for a creative writing lesson, explains Stephanik, smiling. But she saw her daughter was deeply engaged, and since there are no class bells in homeschool, she let her daughter write seven pages.

This flexibility is just one of the reasons Stephanik, who lives in La Verne on the border of Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties, has no doubts about deciding to start homeschooling her daughter during the pandemic.

"I honestly, in my heart, feel that when kids go back this year, they're going to be behind," says Stephanik, a teacher by training. "That just made me sad, and I knew that I didn't want that for my daughter. I didn't want her to be one of the ones who was behind."

FAST-GROWING TREND

Families like the Stephaniks came to homeschooling at record rates during the pandemic, with the numbers doubling from 5.4 percent to 11 percent between March 2020 and March 2021, according to the U.S. Census. Homeschool associations across California saw memberships and social media followings grow, and places that offer curriculum received calls from first-timers eager for solutions.



Drawing is one of the homeschool assignments for Phoebe.

There are many reasons these families say they are making the switch from COVID-19 concerns to the quality of distance learning. Parents report that some children with sensitivities struggle with masks, others want learning centered around religious world views, and still others worry about bullying and racism in the standard classroom. After 18 months of uncertainty, and with so many Californians still centering their lives around the home, some families may never return to brick-and-mortar schools.

"I have seen nothing like this in the last 27 years that I've been reading and studying or following this area," says Martin Whitehead, spokesperson for the Homeschool Association of California. Whitehead, who homeschooled his two daughters all the way through high school, describes the pandemic increase as a



PHOTOS BY WATCHARA PHOMICINDA, SCNG

“breakthrough” number.

It’s hard to know exactly how big that number is in California because the state doesn’t track how many students homeschool in its many forms. Under the umbrella of the public school system, there are independent study programs and homeschool charter programs. The traditional route is where parents choose a curriculum and teach their kids themselves. To get an estimate of how many parents are doing this, many turn to data on private school affidavits.

Affidavits for five students or less are generally a good indication of a homeschool, but it’s not absolute, says Scott Roark, spokesperson with the California Department of Education.

The state saw a 35 percent increase in these small private schools during the 2019-2020 school year. The 2020-2021 school year numbers are still coming in, but are already showing another 34 percent increase. Among Southland counties, Orange leads the way with a 42 percent increase, followed by Riverside, Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties.

Whitehead, who lives in Orange County, says some local school districts are responding by working “feverishly” at distanced learning options and exploring the potential partnerships they could have with homeschoolers.

“People are wanting educational connections and communities that are really more centered around their homes, and they’re really dissatisfied with the traditional school environment,” Whitehead says.

Parents appreciate the extracurriculars — including band and sports — offered at schools, says Whitehead, but he maintains that kids are not getting the customized learning and attention they need. He sees this in conversations around access and equity for students with disabilities and learning differences. With local Black and brown families, they are raising concerns about the school-to-prison pipeline, safety and bias.

“Folks feel their kids are underserved,” Whitehead says.

LIFTING THE CURTAIN

Distanced learning meant parents like Tanisha Hall suddenly got a back seat in the



classroom.

Before the pandemic hit, her oldest daughter would come home complaining about being treated poorly by teachers at her South Los Angeles high school. Hall knew the area’s schools were plagued by systemic inequalities, but she found it hard to believe thinking, “No teacher would talk to you like that.”

Then Hall overheard teachers berating the senior during online instruction. As an educator and owner of a music school, she was shocked. Soon, her daughter was failing. Feeling rebuffed by the school’s administrators, she pulled her daughter out shortly after Thanksgiving.

Hall is not alone. Nearly two-thirds of Black families in Los Angeles didn’t like what they saw during distance learning and weren’t sure they wanted to send their kids back to L.A. Unified schools last spring, according to survey results released in June by the education advocacy group Speak Up. Some parents cited COVID-19 worries, but 43 percent say they have concerns around bullying, racism and academic achievement.

Nationally, Black families saw the biggest

increase in homeschooling of any group with a rise from 3.3 percent in spring 2020 to 16.1 percent by that fall, according to the U.S. Census. Not far behind were Hispanic and Asian households.

Instead of traditional parent-led homeschooling, Hall opted for an online charter program. Within a short while, her daughter was receiving all A’s and B’s in her classes.

“The difference is a supportive learning environment — teachers who actually care, teachers who are meeting the students where they are,” Hall says.

The online charter provided tutoring and other services to help her daughter learn time management and study techniques — resources that weren’t provided at her traditional public school.

Hall’s daughter graduated from high school and is headed to college to study criminal justice. While homeschooling was exactly what her oldest needed, she is sending her 15-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son back to their charter schools for in-person learning this fall.

“I thought the online [school] was



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If we didn't have this option, honestly I would be so lost. I don't even know what we would do.”

Roxann Nazario, parent, Sylmar



PHOTOS BY WATCHARA PHOMICINDA, SCNG

Above, Ryan Stephanik guides Phoebe as she works on a puzzle. At left, Evelyn's task is a Language Arts assignment.

amazing,” says Hall. “But just for myself, I needed a break and I need these kids to be back in school.”

BACK TO THE NEW SCHOOL

Roxann Nazario had a problem to solve when L.A. Unified schools announced a return to the classroom this year.

“As [coronavirus] numbers and cases are going back up and we are getting closer to going back to school, there is no way I can see my daughter stepping foot on campus,” says Nazario, who lives in the northeast San Fernando Valley community of Sylmar.

Nazario's 13-year-old is terrified of COVID-19, and since kindergarten she has struggled with school-related anxiety. Homeschooling was something Nazario considered in the past, but as a single mom with a job that kept her in the field most days, it simply wasn't possible.

“There is a time sink in homeschooling,” says homeschool consultant Jamie Heston, who has seen single parents and two working parents do it successfully, but most have

flexible work schedules and “there is a certain amount of privilege involved there.”

Cost is another consideration. Homeschool charters are state funded and free, but traditional homeschooling can range from a few hundred dollars to \$1,000 per year or more, if parents are paying for fancy online courses, says Heston. Internet access issues can usually be overcome by library resources which she says are really supportive of homeschooling families.

Nazario is now working from home indefinitely due to the pandemic, so homeschooling this fall became a reality. She saw distance learning lift a weight off her daughter's shoulders last year, so Nazario found an online charter program where her daughter will move at her own pace through each school day and gain more independence. They plan to take homeschooling a year at a time.

“If we didn't have this option, honestly I would be so lost,” says Nazario. “I don't even know what we would do.”

Nazario may be part of the tail end of the homeschooling surge. Last fall, Heston was hosting a virtual Homeschool 101 workshop

for more than 100 new parents weekly. Now, it's closer to 50. For families where the shortcomings of distance learning forced them into homeschooling, a lot of them are saying, “Wow, this kind of worked out. So, let's continue,” says Heston.

Ryan Stephanik has no plans to send her 7-year-old and 4-year-old girls back to a brick-and-mortar school. Pre-pandemic, she was eager to send her kids to school since she was starting a real estate career.

“I never in a million years thought that I would be a homeschooler,” Stephanik says.

Now, the family is a one-income household. What at first felt like a necessity to avoid learning loss, Stephanik now values homeschooling for the ability to incorporate her Christian faith into the curriculum. She also sees how the flexibility allows her to challenge her oldest daughter, who loves to read and learn big words, and says one of the beautiful surprises has been the bond that's grown between her daughters.

“This year just taught us that the time we have with them is really short,” Stephanik says. “And now I just feel less worried. I feel less anxious about their futures.” ■