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Parents Want to Control Influences;

Critics See Need for Wide Exposure

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Beyond books

BRYAN, TEXAS: - Steve Beck begs to differ with anyone who believes his children are not properly ``socialized.''

``Our philosophy is to engage the world -- not lead a secluded life. We want to have an impact on the culture,'' said Beck, who, along with his wife, Kerry, home-schools their three children -- Ashley, 16, Gentry, 14, and Hunter, 11.

As the Beacon Journal examined the state of home schooling in America, no issue sparked more debate or stronger emotions than socialization.

The Becks epitomize the independent streak found in many home educators.

Steve, who has a degree in agronomy from Texas A&M, and Kerry, who has a double major and a master's in educationfrom Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas, are entrepreneurs. They run a home-school curriculum and supplies company, and an online business selling materials to reload shotgun shells. Ashley, Gentry and Hunter pitch in.

Steve writes books and is a Calvinist minister. They recently moved from Bryan, Texas, to Moscow, Idaho, so he can attend a seminary. Kerry is the primary teacher for the children.

As a family, they travel to trade shows and conventions, mixing business with the chance to spend time with other home-schooling families.

The Becks are active in their community. They attend church. The parents vote. Their children play on home-school basketball teams. The girls love archery, and Ashley is a three-time state champion skeet shooter for girls her age.

The Becks aren't sitting at home with windows shuttered and doors closed, lives cut off from the rest of the world. So it bothers them and most other home schoolers when people ask: ``Are your children being properly socialized?''

A July U.S. Department of Education report on home schoolers found that 31 percent kept their children home out of concern about what children are exposed to in public and private schools. Another 30 percent said they wanted to control their children's understanding of religious or moral ideas.

Only 16 percent named academic instruction as a reason.

The recent study and one in 1999 that had similar findings make it clear that home-schooling parents want to be the primary influence on their children's moral, ethical and religious views. They don't want their children to be socialized by educators or other children in the public- or private-school setting.

Among Christian home schoolers, this idea is often expressed as their ``worldview.''

For others, known as unschoolers or inclusives, there is a ``me and my children'' approach that asserts that no one -- or no government -- should interfere with their lives. They resent negative outside influences and want to keep their children from being programmed by commercial, materialistic views present in society. They want their children protected from the cliques, bullies and potential violence in schools.

'Fortress home'

Other researchers view the issue differently.

Michael Apple, a University of Wisconsin professor who opposes home schooling, believes most religious families want their children in a protected environment, a phenomenon he calls ``cocooning'' within their ``fortress home.''

Home schools are ``the equivalent of gated communities in which their children will not be tempted by sinful ways or ways that go against their religious beliefs,'' Apple said.

He said these families have a worldview that they believe represents the truth when it comes to God. They do not recognize, nor do they want their children exposed to, the broader society, where ``different truths'' may be represented.

``That's a pretty dangerous position to take, to me. It's a little disrespectful of large numbers of equally religious people who may believe that God spoke in Islamic terms or spoke to Moses or spoke in multiple Christian voices that are not recognized as being really Christian by many home schoolers,'' Apple said. The words ``freedom'' and ``liberty'' ring hollow considering the intolerance among home schoolers for other ideas, he said.

``You can't say at the same time, `Let a thousand flowers bloom' and `All voices be heard' and then say, `Yeah, but ours is the only right voice,' which means that the ultimate goal for my freedom is to deny you the freedom. In a nice way, I will convert you, I will smile and give you the only truth,'' Apple said.

Suspicion, distrust

Home-schooling parents represent about 2 percent of the school-age children in America.

The idea that home-schooling parents believe their approach is the best way to educate children chafes others who continue to enroll their children in traditional settings.

There are feelings of suspicion and distrust on both sides.

``I get people asking me,`Aren't you worried your kids aren't going to socialize?' '' a home-schooling mother told a Beacon Journal focus group in which participants were granted anonymity.

``My kids socialized more after I pulled them out of school than they did when they were in school,'' she said. ``I wish that the public understood we aren't all sitting at home around the kitchen table all day long.''

A children's services worker said parents are isolating their children. ``I really think it's emotional abuse when you don't allow your children to interact with other children, other people,'' she said.

Many non-home schoolers share the belief that home-schooled children are too confined to their own worlds and that socialization comes from learning to get along in different settings with people from different backgrounds.

``They don't want diversity. That is why they home-school,'' a focus group member said. ``They want (the children) to be with people who have the same value system.''

Teamwork with Legos

Home-schooling parents contend that their children are active in their communities, and move easily and comfortably among children and adults of all ages.

Their flexible schedules provide opportunities to pick among community and political events. They organize field trips and meet in groups to learn and play.

Home schoolers are active in 4-H, dance, theater, music and choir, and scouting. Young girls join Keepers of the Home. Home schoolers increasingly form sports leagues or enter competitions that bring them into contact with public- and private-school children.

When Keyan Paglialunga, 15, read about a Lego robot competition, he and Anna Friddle, 15, both of Canton, started recruiting teammates among children they knew from their Creative Learning in My Backyard (CLIMB) home-schooling group.

It was an intriguing challenge: build a functioning robot using microprocessors and Lego blocks, and compete against the designs of other home-schooled, private- and public-school students statewide.

Every Monday for six weeks, they met for half a day at the NASA Glenn Research Center near Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. Keyan's mom, Bonnie, their coach, helped them research the project and program the robot.

At a Stark County church in February, as the demonstration began, it was clear the children worked well together. With only two team members at the competition table at one time, they politely took turns running ``Bob the Bot.''

Their entry won the regional competition, allowing the nine-member team to go the state championship at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base outside Dayton, where they finished third.

``I think it was an opportunity of a lifetime,'' said Kevin Knabel, a 13-year-old home-schooled student from Green.

Ohio gathering

Home schoolers also socialize with other home schoolers.

On a warm June afternoon in Columbus, hundreds of Christian Home Educators of Ohio members, other parents and their children browsed through the large convention hall at Franklin County Veterans Memorial auditorium.

CHEO is a statewide group, but Ohio has scores of local home-school support organizations whose members meet regularly to share ideas and lesson plans, receive legal advice, teach needed classes, find academic assessors or provide guidance for families.

More than 300 vendors in the convention hall displayed their wares, ranging from starter kits to information on numerous Christian colleges.

Thousands of books were stacked, shelved, mounted on stands or hanging from racks. They encompassed a range of subjects from math to spelling to hagiographic biographies.

The conference ended with a high school graduation commencement ceremony.

Before 69 students and their parents walked across the stage, the crowd stood, placed their right hands over their hearts, and recited: ``I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag and to the Saviour, for whose Kingdom it stands, One Savior, crucified, risen and coming again, with life and liberty for all who believe."

Youth sports group

In Texas, when Tom Sanders walks into the Kinkaid School, a private school in an upscale suburb of Houston, the lanky basketball coach and father of six home-schooled children is greeted with affection. Young people grab his arm and smile. Men throw their arms around him and embrace with a comfortable hug.

Sanders, a lawyer and registered Texas lobbyist for the Home School Legal Defense Association, formed theHomeschool Christian Youth Association for his children and several hundred others who wanted a chance to play basketball, baseball, softball and volleyball and to develop their Christian character.

``It became very personal for me because I had a son who fit that category," Sanders said.

He coaches the varsity boys basketball team that has been invited to open tournaments in Texas and has traveled to Oklahoma to play. He said the team is equivalent to a small public or private school for classification purposes, and was one of the better squads in Texas last season.

``One huge reason is the character of these young men. They're not perfect, but they're very teachable, very attentive, very willing to learn, very willing to apply themselves to do what we ask," Sanders said.

He said home schooling and parents' rights take precedence over the team.

``I had a practice last night. One of my best players didn't come because Mom and Dad had family plans. What am I going to do? Yell at them to disobey Mom? Disobey Dad?" Sanders said.

Religious motivations

Steve and Kerry Beck acknowledge that it is what many evangelicals call their ``Christian worldview" that drives them. The phrase means that all aspects of the universe owe their existence to a Christian God.

They said they pulled their children from private religious schools because teachers were stressing academics rather than building a religious foundation.

``We really want our kids to rule and reign for Christ. We couldn't do that on a haphazard basis,'' said Steve Beck. ``The whole idea is we're training battle-hardened soldiers for Christ. The private Christian school wasn't going to do that.''

The Becks wanted a sense of togetherness in their church, so they joined the small, rural Confederation of Reformed Evangelicals that was active in the community.

``I saw it as a very good way to disciple men,'' Steve Beck said.

The influence has been profound. The family moved to Idaho in August so that Steve can study at a seminary run by Douglas Wilson, an outspoken critic of big government and especially public education.

Wilson co-authored a book that argues that Civil War abolitionists ignored the teachings of the Bible, which recognizes slavery.

Beck said Wilson's ``main goal is to get people to think.'' The Bible urges good relationships between slaves and masters, and that's what prevailed in the prewar South, Beck said.

The South was fighting for states' rights, not for slavery, Beck said. Because the South lost, we now have the ``leviathan'' government intruding on all aspects of our lives.

Public schools are an example, he said. Before public education was created in the 1800s, anyone who wanted an education could find one for free, and the literacy rate was much higher than it is today, he said.

Beck said that people coming out of Wilson's school are ``changing the culture from the inside out,'' and that Christians need to infiltrate the world.

``We're in the New Covenant. We're not using swords. We're using the Spirit,'' Beck said.

In his book, A Father's Stew, Beck writes that Christians must reject the notions that women need work to be fulfilled, parents should pursue careers by dumping their children in day-care centers (disparagingly referred to as ``concentration camps'') and education can be provided only by so-called experts.

The Becks want their children to go to college, but they have different aspirations for the three, depending on the gender.

Steve Beck would like his son to become an engineer and wants the girls to get liberal arts degrees so they are able to ``have sons and daughters and teach them to think.''

``I'm not keen on a daughter becoming a doctor and working 90 hours a week,'' he said.

Jorge Gomez, president of the North Texas Home Educators Network in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, has a worldview similar to the Becks'.

Gomez, who came to the United States from Mexico when he was 7, prefers the Anglicized pronunciation ``George'' for Jorge. He discourages discussion of his Hispanic heritage and of diversity among home schoolers because ``we are all one. Home schooling is the great equalizer.''

Gomez, a businessman, and his wife, have three children and are evangelical Christians. He chooses to ``home-church'' by not participating in an organized congregation.

He's troubled by pop culture and what children learn in organized schools.

``We have the freedom to choose. In a school, you don't know what books they're being shown. There are more quotes from Marilyn Monroe than from FDR or about World War II. They don't need pop culture or revisionist history,'' Gomez said.

Image problem

The strong religious views that the Becks, Gomez and others hold can stir anti-home schooling feelings in the larger community. In interviews and focus groups, many non-home schoolers pointed to a ``holier than thou'' attitude that they said permeates many families in the movement.

A public-school parent said in a Beacon Journal focus group that a relative is a fundamentalist Christian who home-schools.

``There is just this arrogance. We all laugh and say, `What is she going to do when she gets to heaven and we are standing there greeting her?' She is going to have a fit when she gets up there, and there we are,'' the parent said.

Some home schoolers are aware of this image problem.

``Sometimes I think, coming from a home-schooled mentality, we have to be very careful that we are not teaching our children that home schoolers are better than other people,'' a Christian mother said.

Unschoolers and inclusives in the movement unite with their Christian counterparts on most home-school issues, but they often resent efforts to impose biblical, faith-based ideas about such topics as abortion, same-sex marriage and stem-cell research on them and the rest of society.

In a focus group, an unschooler mother said Christian home schoolers are rigid in their beliefs -- ``Everybody else is wrong.''

Although religious home schoolers garner the most attention, the movement is vast and diverse.

More diverse

Pam Sorooshian, an econometrician from Long Beach, Calif., describes herself as a non-Christian, politically independent person in a multicultural marriage. She believes home schoolers are unfairly targeted for criticism because they are so closely identified with the religious right.

Sorooshian is co-founder of the National Home Educators Network, a group known as ``inclusives'' because members represent a network of various religions, races, ethnicities and family structures. The group includes bisexuals, pagans, atheists, Mormons, Catholics, Baptists, Jews, Muslims, blacks, Latinos, Asians and Middle Eastern families, she said.

``We have mixed families, gay couples with children, single mothers, working mothers. We have stay-at-home dads. We have a far better cross section of the community than the elementary school that we pulled my 9-year-old out of, which was all-white, had no other races of any kind, and every kid there came from an upper-middle-class neighborhood surrounding the school,'' Sorooshian said in a presentation at the annual American Educational Research Association meeting in San Diego this year.

``Inclusive'' is a term referring to a group open to anyone, including Christians, Sorooshian told the Beacon Journal.

``There is a huge difference between the typical Christian home schooler and the typical inclusive home schoolers,'' Sorooshian said. ``Inclusives have an underlying desire to have their kids out in the world and more exposed to the world. Christian home schoolers are just trying to protect their children.''

She said the idea that inclusive children from home-schooling families are growing up intolerant and uncivil is ludicrous.

She said she started home schooling because her children's public school was not diverse enough.

Now, her children are exposed to a wide variety of people of different backgrounds, ages, religions and cultures.

``In our case, we wanted far more real relationships than what our kids were getting in school,'' Sorooshian said.

Backer wants oversight

Rob Reich, a Stanford University professor who maintains that he supports home schooling, believes that many parents wield too much control over their children and don't want them exposed to contrary ideas.

He contends that children need to learn to participate in a diverse democracy.

``In no other setting are parents as able to direct in all aspects the education of their children, for in home schools they are responsible not only for determining what their children shall learn, but when, how and with whom they shall learn,'' Reich said in a published essay, Testing the Boundaries of Parental Authority Over Education: The Case of Homeschooling.

Many home-schooling parents see Reich as an opponent because he wants government to play a larger oversight role.

He said that while home-schooling parents insist they must have the freedom to raise their children, they often are intolerant of anyone with different views.

``Children can grow up to become ethically servile to their parents, which is incompatible with them being free persons,'' Reich saidin a Beacon Journal interview.

In his speeches and writings, Reich talks about two concepts of society: one in which citizens vote their own interests and the majority rules; and one in which citizens are involved, talk to each other and exchange ideas in the public forum before taking a majority vote.

He believes that home-schooling parents are preventing their children from being part of the public forum, and that the children are being raised in isolation. If they're not part of that forum, they may not know that other views on life exist.

``I think that is a potentially disabling aspect of home schooling,'' Reich told the Beacon Journal.

The state cannot mandate that children from diverse backgrounds come together, but Reich said government can and should insist upon curricula that expose children to different religions, cultures and points of view.

``Not all home schoolers are going to like this, but this will be part of the aim of regulation -- to ensure that even within a home-school environment, children are introduced to and exposed to the world of diversity in a liberal democracy,'' Reich said at the same discussion of education research that Sorooshian attended.

Sorooshian, the inclusive, countered that home schoolers are perplexed when they hear that kind of idea.

``Do we know if we can teach good citizenship?'' she asked. ``Do we know anything about how to teach it? How can they regulate us to make sure we taught our children good citizenship? Require them to go to Girl Scouts?''

Extracurriculars

Reich believes public schools should be required to let home-schooled children play on sports teams and in bands, and sign up for other extracurricular activities.

``It's the wrong stance to take from a public point of view to forbid home-school children from participating in public school activities,'' Reich told the Beacon Journal. ``It ought to be done precisely because it gives the home-school kids an opportunity to interact with more people than they would otherwise in a way that might have civic benefits.''

As the movement has grown, more home-schooled children are having contact with public schools.

The 2001 U.S. Department of Education study, released in July of this year, found that about 20 percent of the estimated 1.1 million home-schooled students were enrolled part time in public schools.

Many states give local school officials the authority to accept or reject home-school students on a part-time basis. In return, some districts that accept part-timers receive funding based on how many classes a home-schooling student takes.

Hugh Caumartin, superintendent of Bowling Green schools in northwest Ohio, said he has seen an increase in home schoolers interacting with his district.

``We do have home-schooled students taking classes in our schools. Typically, they take music, art, science with labs, sports,'' Caumartin said.

These interactions have not come without friction. Home schoolers are accused of cherry-picking public services.

Home schoolers counter that they pay taxes and should be allowed to take classes.

Finances, fairness

Most states defer to local school districts, giving superintendents and boards the authority to devise policies on accepting home schoolers for classes or extracurricular activities.

Some public school officials refuse to provide services to home-schooled students, citing finances and fairness as reasons.

Many school officials believe extracurricular activities are rewards or bonuses used as incentives for academic achievement. Public school students must meet certain academic standards -- such as passing tests or achieving minimum grade-point averages -- before being allowed to play on a

sports team or take part in extracurricular activities. Home-schooled students are not held to the same standards.

In Easton, Pa., home schoolers and the school board clashed over allowing children to play football. In Texas, legislation has been introduced to give home schoolers access to sports and debate teams. In West Virginia, a judge ruled a family could place their son on a wrestling team. In Dayton, Christian schools have accepted home schoolers into their classes and included them in extracurricular activities.

Although home schoolers and their attorneys have been consistently victorious in legal battles, this is one area where courts have decided in favor of public schools more often than not.

``I wish that the schools would be more accepting of kids joining in sports and the extracurricular activities like band,'' an unschooler mom in a Beacon Journal focus group said. ``I think the one thing we would want to go to high school for is the extracurricular activities.''

She offered a solution that would not be popular with most public school parents.

``I would ultimately like to see the extracurricular stuff taken completely out of the schools and made free-standing, like Barberton Little League is not a school-related organization. It's a separate thing, and the kids go play baseball together,'' she said.