From Public School to Homeschool

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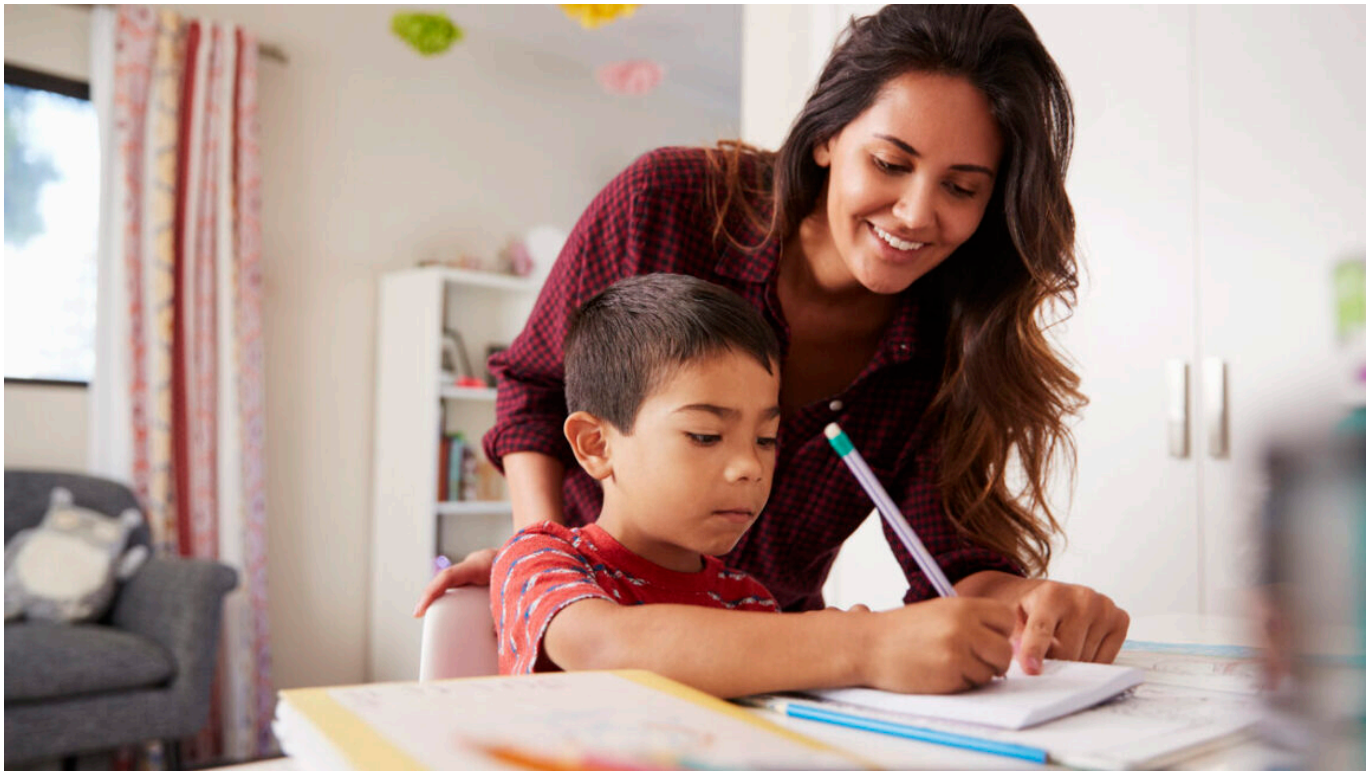

BY:

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Experiences in my previous teaching position inform and strengthen my current work as a homeschooling parent.

What does your typical school day look like? As a public school chemistry teacher, mine followed a certain rhythm, which probably sounds similar to yours: opening warm-up and homework checks, direct instruction or inquiry into a particular topic, group or lab work, wrap-up before the closing bell, repeat for the next class. Fast-forward six years. Now that I'm a homeschooling mom to a second grader, a kindergartener, and a toddler, my new rhythm feels radically different, but it still has echoes of my former classroom routines: opening activities in the morning time (i.e., studying the Bible, singing and reading aloud), instruction in traditional school subjects, hands-on activities through science experiments and art projects. This rhythm is, by necessity, much more flexible—after all, where does a rambunctious two year old fit in when we're learning about ancient Athens? Why, he's quietly getting into the freezer to eat ice cream at 9:30 in the morning, of course! But the day's pattern gives us a familiar structure that allows us to learn and live side-by-side and provides an environment for developing the life-long learning skills that seem to be an essential touchstone in modern education. Sometimes I wonder how exactly I ended up here. Even as a child, I knew that teaching was something that I wanted to pursue, but I never expected the

direction it would take me. From 2006–2011, I taught chemistry at a public high school in central Virginia. I loved my job and my work with students. After the birth of our first child, I stepped away from the classroom to be at home; since then, we have had two other children and I have started homeschooling our oldest, Katie. This year, she is in second grade and our middle daughter, Elise, is starting kindergarten.

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My husband was homeschooled throughout his K–12 education; he completed his PhD in 2011 at the University of Virginia and is currently a professor at a liberal arts college in western Pennsylvania. When he initially suggested that we pursue homeschooling our children, I was resistant to the idea. After all, what did I know about early elementary education? In particular, the prospect of teaching our kids how to read terrified me—it's so fundamental to all learning. What if I did it wrong? Would my children be scarred for life?

But there were aspects of homeschooling that were very appealing—using my general skills as a teacher in a different environment; being able to tailor my teaching and activities around the learning needs and styles of only two children (and a toddler); and choosing to incorporate subjects or books that addressed their own personal character development. Within a homeschool environment, I have the freedom to design our instructional goals and themes around their articular interests and cultivate their love of learning. I can challenge them where they are ready for more difficult skills or content, and remediate where they struggle. Gradually, through trial and error, I have come to really enjoy this direction that we have chosen for our family.

I will be the first to say that it is not for everyone and not for every season of

life—and it is certainly the road “less traveled.” As a novice teacher, I remember feeling very isolated sometimes, particularly when I was struggling with a challenging class. Being a homeschool mom can feel the same way; after all, much of my time is spent at home within the confines of my own family. As a result, I have deliberately made the effort to find and build community with other homeschool families in our small town, similar to the professional learning communities in my public school.

Before our various families started homeschooling, we as moms came from different career fields: some were teachers, some were not. But as we navigate the complexities of being the principal, teacher, and parent in our homeschools, we are all on equal footing. Those struggling in a subject or with a child ask for help; those with experience share suggestions or strategies. We work hard to encourage and support each other without judgment—through forming trusting relationships where we feel the freedom to be open and vulnerable, which takes time and investment. We read books together that challenge our ideas on learning, then try to incorporate what we’re learning into the lessons we teach and learning environments we create. This year, with four other homeschool families, we are forming a co-op for our kids to go on field trips and learn certain topics together, sort of a mini-classroom that meets regularly in each other’s homes.

But what does a homeschool “classroom” actually look like? Every homeschool is unique, just as every classroom is unique, comprised of different students with different strengths and weaknesses, different teachers with various guiding philosophies and interests teaching from different curricula. Although I can’t speak for all homeschools’ routines, I can describe a little of ours.

Our work takes at least two to three hours in the morning, and often art projects or science experiments spill over into the afternoon (or even the weekend, occasionally). Because my instruction is one-on-two, we are able to cover a lot of material in a significantly shorter time span than a traditional school day. We cover topics in history, geography, literature, religion, writing, French, spelling, and math each day, with art projects, music, and science incorporated at least three times per week.

In designing our homeschool, one of my first tasks was to choose a curriculum (or choose to create my own). There are as many curricula as there are home school families, but I was looking for one that combined a cross-curricular focus with academic rigor and, most importantly, flexibility. After all, curriculum is supposed to be a tool that serves me—I shouldn't be bound by it. The one I have settled on is designed to adjust to my own unique needs, with suggestions for books and learning activities at various learning levels that I can choose to incorporate or not, and it is historical in nature—that is, the study of history forms the backbone of the year's study, with other subjects being integrated into that framework, similar to a unit-study model. For example, when we did a unit on ancient Egypt last year in first grade, we read Egyptian myths for literature (and later compared them with the myths of other cultures we were studying), did spelling and grammar work with Egypt-related vocabulary words, learned about the ecology of river deltas like the Nile and made our own paper for science.

Of course, within the framework of the curriculum, I also have the flexibility of adding my own ideas into our work, of speeding up or slowing down our progress, or including materials from other sources. As we're moving through the content, I find that I often have to brush up on my own knowledge of a given topic. How much do you remember about ancient civilizations in India or Byzantine iconography? When was the last time you wrote a grade-appropriate lab activity for exploring magnetism and early compasses, originally developed in ancient China around 2500 BC? It's definitely been a while for me!

Some might see the need for continual learning to be just one more thing on a teacher's ever-expanding plate of responsibilities; for me, continuing education that actually educated me was one of the joys of teaching in public school. Now, I am forced to do this almost daily, since one of the constant challenges in homeschooling is the fact that I don't repeat things. In our homeschool, each day is full of new content that I've never taught before. It forces me to adjust on the fly and be much more flexible with our schedule than I used to be.

One of the major benefits to homeschooling is the natural opportunity it provides to incorporate what we are learning—both content knowledge and process

skills—into other subjects and our everyday lives. The ability to see the connections between school and life is one of the things that can help keep students interested in what we have to teach them; when these become disconnected, teachers often struggle with student engagement, behavior, and performance. As a homeschool mom, opportunities present themselves as we're in the grocery store, identifying fruits and vegetables in French or adding up the cost of the items in the cart. When we're baking, we talk about phases of matter and chemical versus physical changes. These cross-curricular connections help cement their developing understanding and reveal that all knowledge is interrelated. While the compartmentalization of content makes it much easier to teach in a classroom, it can limit the ability of students to apply what they're learning to life. Incorporating subjects back together allows them to see the world as a united whole, not as fragmented parts. This re-integration is also the goal of the unit study method, which seems to be gaining traction in some school districts.

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Homeschooling involves our whole family each day. When we are reading history or literature, we do it together. When we do science experiments, both girls make predictions and participate in the experiment itself; even my two-year-old son Peter can play with (or break, or try to eat) the materials. Homeschool science curricula often are light on hands-on activities, and since parents aren't always confident in these subjects themselves, they rely on reading more challenging texts.

In my classroom, I found that I was most able to engage students when they were doing something, not just reading out of a textbook or listening to me lecture. Thus, in my homeschool, I've developed my own science curriculum this year that incorporates many different experiments and learning experiences. I also

deliberately manage the way we spend our time during the school day, so that quieter seat work is broken up by more physically active and engaging tasks—like phonics hopscotch or music notes tic-tac-toe. My girls love playing games, so incorporating our learning into this format seemed like an easy way to reinforce skills and content.

Sometimes, this all-together-ness looks like chaos—as Katie and I are working on math or drawing a diagram of the water cycle on a whiteboard, Peter is climbing on the table, erasing the words with his feet or trying to hang from the dining room chandelier. A few minutes later, while Katie is reading independently, Elise is working on letters and Peter is trying to take the pencil away from her or rips out a page from the binder, much to her chagrin. Managing the chaos is definitely a challenge! I try not to get lost in the frustration of the moment and to respond firmly, but with kindness. My children aren't perfect, but neither am I. This openness drives many of our conversations after a particular incident and helps to resolve the conflict.

Other times, this whole-family model is truly beautiful. You know the thrill you get when a student has a breakthrough and understands something essential to your content? It's the feeling that makes all the angst worth it, right? I get the privilege of experiencing that each day with my own children. I get a front-row seat to watch them grow, mature, and learn every time we open a book or do an experiment at my kitchen table.

Sometimes our learning goals are small—the tail on the g should go below the line—and sometimes they are more comprehensive—what does this myth teach us about ourselves and the world around us? We get our hands (very!) dirty with paper mache models of Greek amphora, salt maps showing some of the geographical features of Egypt, caterpillar cocoons, oobleck, and art projects. We compare relative densities of coins, measure the rate of oxygen consumption of candles, and excavate model pyramids by decoding hieroglyphs to uncover model mummies.

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Homeschooling does not mean I can do anything I want or nothing at all; I am held accountable to the district and state for the academic progress of my children. At the beginning of a school year, I spend some time reviewing state standards for our current grade levels and trying to align what we're doing with process skills or content that would be covered in a traditional school. Reporting laws vary by state; in Pennsylvania (considered to be a high-regulation state by the Home School Legal Defense Association (n.d.)), I will have to submit a portfolio at the end of each year after each child turns eight to an outside source licensed by the state to evaluate our curriculum and progress. The portfolio contents will have to include lesson plans showing the scope of the content that I have covered, samples from our work in the different subjects that show "reasonable progress," reading lists, and attendance logs (to make sure we're meeting state minimums of instructional days and hours). In addition, my children will have to take standardized tests in math and language arts from an approved list of choices at the end of third, fifth and eighth grades. The district superintendent has the right to challenge whether or not I am providing a "reasonable education" based on our portfolios and test scores and conduct an audit, if necessary.

There are definitely times when I wonder if we're doing the right thing. When people ask Katie what she's learning in school, sometimes she answers, "I don't go to school." Yikes! But when she comes down in the morning and asks to get started early (as she often does), or picks up one of our school books to start reading it on her own, or when Elise sings a children's song of French greetings to herself when we're on a walk, I know that we are on the right path for our family. I don't know how long we will continue on this homeschool journey, but for now, we're continuing in that direction. We have chosen the road less traveled, and I hope it makes all the difference.

CITATION

Verbois, R. (2018). From public school to homeschool. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 5(1), 19–22.