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# Home schooling allows parents to individualize education



JEFF SCHEID/LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

Elissa Wahl, center, director of RISE Education Resource Center at 3460 N. Rancho Drive, and instructor Timothy Nolan, right, assist students, from left, Malachi Murphy, 9, Bekem Hays, 7, Sebastian Wahl, 6, and Vance Nolan, 13, during Lego Star Wars camp. The summer camp is for home-schooled children.

By LISA FERGUSON

Like countless other high school seniors throughout the nation, Benjamin Murphy donned a traditional cap and gown at his recent graduation ceremony during which the familiar "Pomp and Circumstance" march was played.

What set this commencement apart from most others, however, was its size: Having spent the entirety of his academic career as a home-schooled student, taught primarily by his mother for the past dozen years, Benjamin was the lone graduate of his class. (Another local home-school graduate also participated in the event.)

The small ceremony was in the sanctuary of a Las Vegas church, where Benjamin took the stage and gave a heartfelt address about his educational experience:

"Being home-schooled wasn't about sitting in a classroom and having knowledge tossed to me," the 18-year-old told the audience, which was comprised of a few family members and fellow home-schooled friends. "It was about being taught how to think critically, ask questions and search for answers."

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Benjamin was presented a diploma issued by his parents, who downloaded the document off the Internet for the occasion. His mother, Jené Murphy, assured it was “just as pretty and just as beautiful” as the diploma she received upon graduating from a traditional brick-and-mortar high school decades ago.

“It doesn’t matter where you get your diploma from as long as you have the education that can back it up,” she said.

Not surprisingly, Murphy is quite confident about the quality of education her children (including Benjamin’s younger siblings Grace, age 12, and Malachi, 9) have received under her tutelage. The ability to individualize lesson plans and other educational opportunities to suit each child’s specific needs and capabilities is cited as a major benefit of home schooling by many parents-turned-educators.

“Each child learns differently. ... Being able to work individually and give them what they need when they need it” are important, Murphy said, adding that it can help a child develop “that love of learning.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by Elissa Wahl, a Las Vegas mother who began home schooling her sons after her family moved from New Jersey in 2000. In the years since, she has become one of Nevada’s leading advocates for home schooling, and works to inform other parents about education options for their children.

“I truly believe every child has their own special needs so the ability to be able to individualize what they’re learning, how they’re learning it, when they’re learning it and even if they need to learn it” is crucial, she said.

In 2002 Wahl helped found the Nevada Homeschool Network, a nonprofit group that advocates for home-school freedom and families’ rights to direct their children’s education. The group reports on legislative, legal and other matters relevant to home schooling on its website, [nevadahomeschoolnetwork.com](http://nevadahomeschoolnetwork.com).

She and the leaders of several home-school “support groups” from throughout the state — whose parent and student members often network, share resources, socialize and participate in lessons and other activities together — initially joined forces to create a grass-roots organization, Wahl said. But it quickly developed into something larger.

“We knew right away we wanted to be a lobby organization,” she recalled. “We wanted to impact the home-schooling laws, and we’ve been very successful at that.”

In 2007 Nevada Homeschool Network oversaw the state Legislature’s passage of Senate Bill 404, also called the “Homeschool Freedom Bill.” It provides an exemption to the law for parents who wish to continue directing their child’s education after the state’s compulsory school age of 7, and allows them to do so without interference by the Nevada State Board of Education or local school districts.

The organization also brought forth Senate Bill 314, which was passed in this year’s legislative session. According to Nevada Homeschool Network’s website, it defines the fundamental right of parents to raise their child and requires all governmental agencies to honor that right unless there is a compelling reason to do otherwise.

Wahl called the law “imperative in a home-school setting as we, the parents, are the ones charged with directing our child’s education. This law is actually a tool to empower parents. They need to know and understand they are charged with making decisions for their child — decisions about health care, decisions about religion, decisions about education.”

Wahl, who serves as the network’s vice chairwoman, said the organization has “worked very, very hard” in its attempts to make legislators “see us when they think of home schooling. We want them to think about us as diligent and loving parents who have chosen this path” of educating their children.

According to recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2007 an estimated 1.5 million U.S. students were home-schooled. Wahl estimates about 6,000 students are home-schooled in Nevada.

In working to boost home schooling’s profile, Wahl said she has become knowledgeable about other education options for Nevada students, including public schools, charter schools and distance-education programs.

It is information that all parents should have, she said.

Many “don’t know what a magnet school is. They don’t know what an empowerment school is. They don’t know what a Title I school is. They don’t know what a charter school is. They don’t know what these terms mean, so we really need to educate our parents ... so they can find the best places for their child, because if your child is placed in the best academic setting for that child and that family that kid’s going to go farther.”

It is one reason why, in 2009, Wahl co-founded RISE (Renaissance in Student Education) Education Resource Center. The nonprofit center at 3460 N. Rancho Drive is working to become a one-stop shop for Southern Nevada families where they can learn (via classes, events and resource materials, among others) about the educational options for children.

“I want every family to know what their options are as far as education goes, because (oftentimes) they know there’s the local public school and they know there’s the expensive private school, but they don’t know what all the other options are,” Wahl said.

“I welcome every family to walk through our door and say, ‘Here’s what we need for our kid.’ (At the center) we know that not every one schooling option fits every parent or every child.”

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To help prospective home-school parents better understand the process, the center will offer "Introduction to Homeschooling," free classes at 7 p.m. July 29 and Aug. 15. The class will cover topics for parents such as how to determine which curricula and academic-testing options are right for their child, as well as tips for properly organizing a home and planning meals around the school day.

As inconsequential as the latter may seem, those can be "serious issues that will make somebody want to put their kid back in (public) school" if they are not prepared to deal with them, Wahl said. "If we can head off those issues at the beginning of the journey, it could really help."

The center offers a more intensive, eight-week "Homeschoolers 101" course twice annually.

Wahl said the center is in search of "expert" volunteers to teach its fee-based, daytime classes to students. Previous subjects have included literature, foreign language, science and art, among others. (Murphy is set to begin teaching a geography course there this fall.)

"We're looking for dynamic personalities that are passionate about their topics," Wahl said. "If you know how to make bead bracelets, come in and teach how to make bead bracelets. If you love teaching French, come in and teach French." For more information, visit [risersourcecenter.org/volunteer/](http://risersourcecenter.org/volunteer/).

The center also provides another opportunity for home-school students to socialize with others their age — a criticism commonly voiced by those who are unfamiliar with home schooling, Wahl said.

In the 1970s and '80s, when many states' laws about home schooling were in their infancy, "Parents really did have to keep their kids in the home a lot during the day because they didn't want to be caught" and cited by law enforcement agencies for not having their child attend a traditional school, she said.

As laws have changed and home-schooling advocacy has grown, nowadays "there is no need to stay in your home." Wahl said there are more than 40 home-school support groups in Las Vegas, each offering students a plethora of activities in which to participate, including sports and field trips to local points of interest.

Socializing her children has not proved problematic for Murphy.

"I always joke that the hardest part of home schooling is being home long enough to get the home schooling done, and Las Vegas is definitely someplace where there are so many opportunities within the community to do so many exciting things with the kids that it's just never-ending," she said. "As an educator, that's what you want."

Murphy said that when Benjamin also began taking courses at a community college two years ago, at age 16, he was confident because home schooling "helped him to experience a wide variety of people.

"When you home school, you are not (at) home. You're out in the world; you're doing service projects; you're interacting with your neighbors. He's been out there and he's experienced people of all ages and all walks of life," she said.

In his graduation speech, Benjamin agreed: "I had already had to learn to self-motivate to get my work done. I had already learned how to manage my time and keep track of the various projects different classes required me to complete. In a way, I had been learning the college process since elementary school."

About his mother's dual role as his teacher, he added: "Mom frequently jokes that she doesn't know how she taught me more than she knows, but it's simple: She taught me how to learn."

"I think I realized very early on that I cannot teach my children everything they will ever need to know," Murphy said of her family's home-school experience. "But if I can teach them how to love to learn, then there's really nothing I can stop them from learning."



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