

A guide for families considering home schooling

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has varied greatly in communities nationwide, it is apparent that some residual impacts of the virus will be felt universally for years to come. During the spring months of the 2019-20 school year, schools around the country found themselves scrambling to transition to the requirements of “distance learning.” Students familiarized themselves with evolving technologies, and parents grappled with how best to [support their children’s education](#) while fulfilling their own responsibilities. Even as schools now take a lull for summer vacation, many are sorting out the details of what “school” will look like when classes resume this fall.

Catholic schools prepare to face challenges

John Reyes serves as executive director of operational vitality for the National Catholic Educational Association. NCEA, which works with Catholic educators to support ongoing faith formation and the teaching mission of the Catholic Church, is aiding schools with a pandemic response that is centered around creating communities of shared practice, providing professional development, live and on demand for teachers and leaders, and advocacy on behalf of schools and dioceses at the federal and state level.

“The pandemic has accelerated the impact with a lot of already vulnerable financial situations for both parishes and schools, and there is a disproportionate impact on schools that serve underrepresented and disadvantaged communities,” Reyes said. “Schools are also facing significant challenges in terms of their ability to plan for safe and effective reopening plans

for the fall. Between access to [personal protective equipment], implementing varied guidance from the state and federal level, the logistical gymnastics required to operate either in person or online at the drop of a hat, and maintaining flexibility for both educators and students who may be especially vulnerable, this is a brand new frontier in terms of operational planning that no school is particularly walking into with tons of expertise.”

[Schools nationwide pivoted quickly](#) during the past year to provide for the educational needs of their learning communities. “We talk often of how Catholic schools educate the whole child and how our schools provide a sense of family and community,” Reyes said. “I truly believe that it is the sense of mission that animates that belief that led the 150,000+ Catholic school educators nationwide to rapidly build out and execute their distance or online learning plans at the drop of the hat and while learning on the fly.”

Catholic schools nationwide continue to meet virtually through virtual programming offered by NCEA to address schools’ issues such as financial and budgeting issues, mental health and socio-emotional learning for the coming school year.

Reyes says that a school’s commitment to adaptations is a part of their mission-driven orientation. “An illustrative point is that our Catholic schools believe that learning for every child is so important that we are committed to moving mountains to do so – [which] tells us that the capacity for mission-driven innovation is and has always been there,” he said. “It tells us that our Catholic school communities take seriously their charge to form disciples that they are willing to learn, implement, adjust and transform their work as the situation demands it. If you’re a parent trying to figure out what school will best unlock the potential of your child, I think having those attributes in teachers is really, really compelling.”

Discerning home schooling

For many families, the entree into formal distance learning or a concern about the new policies and procedures at both public and private educational institutions has caused them to consider what has become an [increasingly popular learning model: home schooling](#). To gauge opinions of families discerning this choice and to share wisdom from experienced home-schoolers, Our Sunday Visitor reached out to large home-schooling communities to seek input. Many of the names of individuals who are quoted below have been altered at their request to protect families' privacy. Among the themes being discussed, common attitudes and questions recur.



Students work online via the computer on April 3 during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Because of the pandemic and other concerns, more families are considering home schooling this fall. CNS photo/Utrecht Robin, ABACAPRESS.COM via Reuters

Susan is the mother of a child who will begin kindergarten this fall. "With all of the possible restrictions and new guidelines being placed on students and teachers, I think it

would be best to home-school," she shared. "Kindergarten should be fun and full of learning and making friends. I'm afraid they'll be strict because of COVID19."

Many families are determining that the best options for one child may not work for all of their children. Tara's family will only home-school their eldest, a high schooler. She was inspired by what her family learned from their exposure to distance learning. "We noticed that our children not only received higher grades on their school work this trimester from home, but also were impressed at how they were self-motivated to complete all their assignments and attend all their Google Meets with their classes on their own. It kind of made us say, 'Hey, we could do this,'" Tara said. "Of course, I realize that what they've been doing for the last three months is not really home schooling in the true sense of the word. But we're at least willing now to seriously consider it."

While concerns over the efficacy of social distancing and safety concerns surrounding the coronavirus were frequently mentioned by families considering home schooling, many more expressed the joy and satisfaction they have felt playing an increased role in their children's education. "During quarantine, I realized how much our family enjoyed working together," said one Illinois parent who will home-school for the first time at the onset of the new school year.

Growing the domestic church

In a very real sense, by merit of parents' universal call to be the primary faith formators for their children, every family is a home-schooling family. Every parent, from the moment they begin to prepare for the baptism of their first child, becomes a fundamental part of educating his or her family. Regardless of whether a family home-schools full time or sends their children to public or Catholic school, care and nurturing of the domestic church should be a priority for

Catholic families.

Father Edward Looney, pastor of two rural parishes in Wisconsin, has worked with home-schooling families by celebrating Mass and assisting with religion lessons and special projects. "One way the domestic church is made present through home schooling is by the primacy of prayer," Father Looney said. "At the beginning of the school day, start with a prayer. Pray the Angelus. Pray at the end of school. Surround yourself with holy images of Jesus, Mary and the saints. Of course, Mass could be a part of the day, whether it is physically present, but now as we have learned through the pandemic, by virtual attendance. Hearing the word of God and listening to a reflection might be beneficial for all in the family."

Pauline Sister Nancy Usselmann, who serves as the national director of the Pauline Center for Media Studies, routinely offers "media mindfulness" seminars for home-schooling communities. "It is such a challenge for parents to navigate the digital culture and to teach their children to do the same," Sister Nancy said. "We support them through our center with tools to be engaged digital citizens but especially critical thinkers and evaluators of the media they both consume and create."

Sister Nancy has noticed that home-schooling parents can teach the Faith intellectually as well as practically all at the same moment. "To nurture the domestic church," she said, "it is important to incorporate concrete learning experiences and spiritual practices that reinforce the catechesis, such as the corporal works of mercy and actions for social justice, as well as various prayer practices that lead the family to union with God and each other."

Father Looney reminds all families, including home-schoolers, to carefully assess their schedules. "A priority of nurturing the domestic church is to evaluate what the needs of your

family are,” he said. “Sometimes we get caught up on doing more. But sometimes less can also be good. All things in balance.”

Getting started and growing in confidence

Families who currently home-school offer a balanced perspective on the many blessings of educating in the home versus the challenges of doing so. Their advice reflects the reality that every home is different, and, as such, every home-school experience will be unique.



Amerie Ellis, 14, studies on her laptop during a home-schooling session at her Tallahassee, Fla., home March 31. CNS photo/Shazia Simmons, USA Today Network via Reuters

“Hang out with home-schoolers. Listen to their stories, ask lots of questions and pray,” said Lisa Mladnich, host of The Homeschooling Saints Podcast. “Make sure both spouses are on board before you make a commitment. You’re going to be scared. Everyone is, at first, but your confidence will grow as your children blossom before your eyes.”

Experienced home-schooling families recommend attending a conference or connecting with a local home-schooling family or

cooperative to ask questions about curricula, schedules, social opportunities and faith community activities before making a final decision. Examine a variety of curricula and programs. Borrow materials from other home-schoolers before making purchase decisions. Consider the learning needs of each of your children individually.

The first year of home schooling will be a time of transition and adjustment as family members learn new patterns and routines. "My advice is to focus on very basic things," advised Eleanor, a home schooling parent in Canada. "Do not compare your children to other kids of the same age. Children are unique, they bloom in their own time. But most important of all, strengthening our faith, developing good habits and moral values should be our focus."

Many home educators decide to compliment their own instruction with supplementary materials, particularly when they feel that their own grasp of a subject may not be strong. But most are also quick to remind other home-schoolers that no teacher is perfect in every subject. Many parents employ online resources such as Homeschool Connections, which offers online, individually paced course materials.

Kari, a home-schooling mother in Indiana, made the decision to educate at home to meet the needs of children with distinct learning styles. Their family has grown by cultivating family relationships, finding the freedom and time to pursue individual aptitudes and interests. "Write out why you home-school every year, because this changes as you continue home-schooling," Kari said. "Join a co-op for support and resources. On hard days, stop and read a book aloud, do brain breaks with games or get outside. Serve in your community as a family."

Home-schooling socialization and

extracurricular activities

One common misperception about home schooling is that home-schooled children are in some way less social than their traditionally schooled peers. "I always have to laugh when I hear this question – socialization has never been an issue," said Maureen Wittmann, co-founder of Homeschool Connections. "Because home schooling takes far fewer hours (no roll call, no changing of classes, etc.), my children had time to spend on special interests. Over the years, we participated in tons of home-school clubs, 4-H, sports, gymnastics, parish ministries and so much more. It's a great life!"

Home-schooling cooperatives and groups are prevalent and welcome families to a variety of educational and extracurricular activities. FISCHETeen (Families In Support of Catholic Home Education for Teens) is one such initiative. It was created to provide a safe, healthy, teen community for Catholic home-schoolers to encourage personal, spiritual and emotional growth. Participants take place in service projects such as pro-life initiatives and gather for activities, dances and games.

"We are part of a home-school support group based at a local parish that offers parent support and a means for organizing group activities," said Kim, a home-schooler in Minnesota. "Last year, we did a group science class at a local nature center, a couples potluck, new home-schooler tea and a school year kick-off picnic."

Many home-schooling families avail themselves of scouting programs and join sporting teams at their local Catholic schools or participate in community-based sports. With less structured schedules, home-schooling families often find even more time for extracurriculars such as music and dance lessons, Lego League, local theater and outings to local museums, zoos and recreational areas.

“We have a great Catholic home-school community in our city. There have been First Friday Masses where we stay after for the kids to have their lunch and play, park days, moms’ nights out, a Catholic moms’ monthly evening of discussion, activities in the parish like choir, Little Flowers, scouts, book clubs with the kids, and co-ops,” said Stephanie, a home-schooling parent in California. “We also have lots of extended family who are their best friends. The kids have participated in the local spelling bees, days of work at the food bank with their friends, and various other get-togethers with their friends.”

Facing the realities of home schooling

Any family these days faces the balancing act of busy schedules, family finances and work responsibilities. “So much of day-to-day home schooling is about forming and fostering discipline – and not just in the kids! The schooling parent needs to be disciplined as well in following through, listening and getting needs met,” said Kirby, a home-schooling parent in Minnesota. “If I want my kids to be lifelong learners, I need to be that myself. Making sure parents take time to foster their own passions, interests and relationships. Home schooling means lots of time with your kids, but it can become very easy to start living through your kids. No one needs that kind of pressure!”



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Sara, a home educating parent in Massachusetts, points to the fact that some may need the support of extended family to balance care of younger children, responsibilities such as shopping or doctors' appointments, and a full calendar of classes and activities. Jeanne, a mother with both middle schoolers and babies, reflects that once older children become more independent with their studies, there is less demand on the parent to coordinate every lesson. Home-schooling families may be able to economize on curricular spending by attending home-schooling conferences, participating in co-op swaps, purchasing used materials and being mindful of specials offered by publishers.

Education for children with special learning needs can be challenging regardless of the environment. "Teaching a child who has special needs can be hard," said Rachel, a home-schooling mother. "My daughter has dyslexia, and trying to teach her to read was incredibly difficult and stressful. After her diagnosis, we started her with a tutor who specializes in dyslexia, and she has grown tremendously in her reading ability."

Anne Marie Williams is a stay-at-home mom, nurse and writer whose own education included both home schooling and time in Catholic schools. Her home-schooling experience with the Seton curriculum enabled her to earn both college credits and scholarship funding to complete her college education. She looks forward to beginning home schooling with her eldest child this fall and shared that one of her greatest challenges has been dealing with other people's misconceptions about home schooling.

"Some people will be ok with you home schooling; others won't," Williams said. "If those who object are close to you, or you value their opinion in other matters, try doing a quick evaluation on what they know about home schooling. Our pediatrician felt concerned about our plan to home-school because she lacked knowledge about curriculums, socialization

opportunities and more. Once I gave her a resource to read, we were then able to have a reasonable conversation.”

Home-schooling success stories

Sometimes, the most accurate sign of success in an effort is to examine the fruits of one’s labor. With home-schooling families, it’s easy to find faithful, productive adults who benefited from their parents’ decisions to home-school.

Rebecca Martin, an associate book editor for OSV and newlywed residing in Westland, Michigan, was home-schooled from preschool through high school. When asked how home schooling helped her become the person she is today, Martin’s praise for her parents was effusive. “So many ways! I’m an editor because my dad’s writing instruction taught me both how to write and how to edit. I love the written word, and I have a passion for books because my mom made sure I developed reading comprehension skills and was exposed to a wide, challenging variety of books. I chose to go to Christendom College – a decision which changed my life and set me on the path to where I am today – because I received an education that set me up perfectly for a Catholic liberal arts degree, but even more, because I had learned to value a Catholic culture. I chose to commit to my faith as an adult because every day I received an example of prayer and service, not to mention a strong family liturgical life and excellent catechesis,” Martin said.

Matthew Cole, a systems engineer living in Oxnard, California, began home schooling as a fourth grader when a family move took him into a new school district. “I continued with home schooling through the end of eighth grade, at which point my parents and I jointly decided that public high school would provide a better environment for growth,” Cole said. “Thanks to the great preparation I received through home schooling, I graduated valedictorian and went on to major in aerospace engineering at MIT.” As part of a military family who moved frequently, Cole recognizes that home schooling during those

years afforded a continuity of education which might otherwise have been challenging.

John and MariaTeresa Carzon are siblings in a family which home-schooled from elementary through high school. Their mother, Jeanne, a teacher, researched and built curriculums specifically suited for each of her children. "The independent learning style in home schooling placed responsibility on me to make sure that I was completing my studies," said John, currently a graduate student. "This worked for me since I am a very learning-oriented person, and it prepared me for the responsibility of attending college, where I earned a 4.0 through my undergraduate degree."

MariaTeresa Carzon, currently an undergraduate studying graphic design, pointed to the family's experience of home schooling as a highlight of her education. "Being part of a co-op will connect you to other newbies that are starting this adventure along with you as well as introduce you to some home schooling veterans who can give you in-depth advice. Perhaps most importantly, it will help you to not feel alone."

Both Rebecca Martin and Matthew Cole, now look back at their home schooling experiences with appreciation and encourage parents to keep a proper perspective in educating their children.

"I think the most important thing is to be very clear about your goals. Part of what makes the home schooling community so exciting and vibrant is the huge diversity of people, personalities and approaches," Cole recommends. "Some folks, like my mom, like to prioritize academic excellence, but others focus on creating spiritual well-roundedness or helping struggling students grow, both of which are equally valid. The key determinant of success is honesty with yourself about why you have decided to pursue home schooling. Those goals are the polestar that will help you navigate the divide between how home schooling played out in your head and the day-in, day-out

realities of getting the math lessons done.”

“The most important thing about home schooling isn’t the resources or classes or field trips. Human development begins and is rooted in the home, in the family,” Martin said. “As parents, your job is to raise well-formed, faithful humans. Sometimes that looks like struggling through a math book, but sometimes it looks like taking a mental health day and going to the park for a walk. Sometimes it looks like a trip to a battlefield, but more often it looks like leading your children in prayer. And that’s really the important thing. Your ‘why’ for home schooling should be rooted in the desire to lead your children to holiness. Whether you take them to the art museum or they win the national spelling bee – those are moot points. Show them how to be saints, and they’ll grow up trying to be just that. And what better parenting win could you have?”

Lisa Hendey writes from California.

Podcasts about home schooling:

- "[Scholé Sisters](#)" – A casual conversation about topics of interest to parents involved in classical home schooling,
- "[Read Aloud Revival](#)" – Sarah Mackenzie offers inspiring interviews, tips and book lists to encourage family reading,
- "[A Delectable Education](#)" – Weekly conversations among home-schooling mothers on the practical application of the Charlotte Mason method of education,
- "[Your Morning Basket](#)" – Biweekly conversation on the practical principles of home schooling,
- "[Homeschooling Saints](#)" – The podcast that helps you create the home school you love for the people you love.

Curriculum resources for home schooling:

The following is an alphabetical list of the curricular resources most highly recommended by more than 100 home-schooling families surveyed about their favorite resources:

- [Angelicum Academy](#) – A flexible enrollment program inspired by Great Books and the study of classic literature and liberal arts topics.
- [Catholic Heritage Curricula](#) – A complete, lesson plan based program constructed to encourage students to "learn how to learn."
- [Homeschool Connections](#) – In the spirit of the New Evangelization, this program offers two types of online classes: live, interactive courses that meet in real-time, and recorded, independent-learning courses to fit a family's pace and schedule.
- [Kolbe Academy](#) – Rooted in tradition, the program seeks to harness the power of technology to offer an orthodox Catholic, classical and flexible education.
- [Mater Amabilis](#) – A free online pre-K-8 Charlotte Mason style curriculum for Catholics designed to be used independently or in conjunction with other Charlotte Mason influenced curriculum focusing on the education of the whole person.
- [Mother of Divine Grace School](#) – A Catholic distance education program providing information, resources and support necessary to educate according to the classical tradition.
- [Our Lady of Victory School](#) – A Catholic scholastic method of education following in the example of St. Thomas Aquinas in an effort to help the students to grow both academically and morally.
- [R.A.S. Online Academy and Schola Rosa](#) – A two-fold company providing online academy services as well as a full, Catholic curriculum.
- [Seton Home Study School](#) – An accredited program that provides access to academic and support counseling, grading and record-keeping, and a solid Catholic curriculum and community.
- [St. Thomas Aquinas Academy](#) – A 12-year Catholic classical liberal arts curriculum for the home-schooling family.