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Homeschooling can work well

Gov. Tom Corbett has called for innovation, competition and choice in our education system. The following is one of a series of articles about different approaches to education.

Commentary by Thomas Hylton

Brad Reinhart, a computer technician for North End Computers in Pottstown, is one of the brightest people I know. Not only does he expertly build and repair computers, he is knowledgeable about a wide range of subjects.

After attending first grade in the Oley School District, Brad was homeschooled for the next 11 years and received a homeschool high school diploma recognized by the state Department of Education.

Brad's mother, Linda Reinhart, decided to homeschool Brad simply because it was too difficult to get him to public school. "We live in a remote area of Oley, and the nearest bus stop was a mile and half away," Linda said.

It became so troublesome driving him to and from school Linda decided to homeschool him and later his three younger siblings.

With the passage of the Pennsylvania Homeschool Act in 1988, uniform standards were established and parents were given the legal right to homeschool in any district.

Parents must sign an affidavit each summer that they will homeschool their children. School districts must lend copies of their curriculum materials, including textbooks, to homeschool parents. Parents must provide 180 days of lesson plans to the district and keep a portfolio with a sample of the materials used and the work done by the student.

Homeschooled students must take statewide standardized tests. At the end of each year, they must be interviewed and evaluated by a state certified teacher.

The Reinhart children rose at 7 and did chores assigned on a rotating basis until school began at 8:30. Although each child had his own desk, most of the work was done on the dining room table. Linda went from child to child assigning and assessing work.

"I kind of learned along with them," Linda said. "It was a great refresher from when I was in school. It's amazing how much more you learn when you're teaching it to someone else."

Sometimes she called in a tutor. "When Brad was taking algebra, "I didn't know it very well, so I dropped Brad off at a secondary math teacher's house, and she taught Brad while I babysat her child." The tutor was a phone call away if Brad had a problem. "They had the same book, and she would walk him through it." The tutor also helped Brad with calculus and trigonometry.

At first, Linda thought she would only homeschool until her children were ready for high school, "but then when Brad was in sixth grade, I said I can do one more year, and then I just kept going."

The Reinharts joined an association of homeschoolers who met every other Wednesday at a local church where there was a gym and a social room for music and art.

"As our children got older, and we had more high schoolers, we did biology and chemistry together. A pastor at a local church designed a writing program for older students and he would lecture every other week. He would email them their assignments."

High school material was geared toward the SATs, which all her children took. The lowest combined reading and math score of any of her children was 1050, which is still above the national average.

"Our children loved being at home," Linda said. "It allowed them to pursue their own interests. Brad started working on computers at 12 and built his first computer at 14."

Some people fear homeschooled children will be socially backward, but Linda found just the opposite. "When we had new homeschoolers in our group, our children always went out of their way to welcome them. Public school students are not always as welcoming. And it always seems easier for homeschoolers to talk to adults. Maybe it's because they spend 80 percent of their time with adults."

Linda believes homeschooled children are more likely to be independent thinkers. "They learn to figure out things on their own. They just can't look over to see how somebody else is doing it."

The Reinharts' experience shows that, properly done, homeschooling can be just as effective as public or private schools. In fact, there is a famous case of three brothers who were homeschooled on a California goat farm and all went to Harvard.

With the rise of charter cyber schools, which allow children to get lessons via the Internet, we can expect to see far more students getting their education at home. Public schools should accommodate — not fight — these changes, and work to enrich everyone's education.

Thomas Hylton is a member of the Pottstown School Board. However, the thoughts expressed are his alone and not the board's.

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