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Situation: I am writing to the Catholic community of the Diocese of Rochester, NY, in hopes of convincing members with children to consider home schooling as a viable option. Nearly all of the Catholic schools in the diocese have been shut down in the past few years, leaving these families looking for somewhere to send their kids to school. As someone who has been home schooled for ten years, I understand the needs of these suddenly school-less families and the benefits home schooling can offer. My argument would be suitable for publication in *The Catholic Courier*, the official newspaper of the Diocese of Rochester.

A Question of Choices

The Problem

As readers of *The Courier* will surely know, these are lean days for the Diocese of Rochester. The priest shortage is growing ever worse. Poverty is growing faster than outreach programs can keep up. Local parishes are clashing with Bishop Clarke over his liberal stance; while he is in turn under fire from the Archbishop of New York. Among all this, one of the direst problems facing the diocese is that of its schools. Since 2007, around two dozen parish Catholic schools have been closed in the diocese—fourteen in 2008-2009 alone. This has left hundreds of families with the difficult choice of where to send their children for education. Certainly New York's public school system is unattractive, holding the undesirable status of America's worst value in schools. According to the state governor, Andrew Cuomo, New Yorkers spend more on public education than the citizens of any other state; yet the Empire State has consistently been worsening in its national education ranking. Currently, it is ranked around thirty-fourth on a national for education results. Private schools might be a solution, yet to many families these are not financially viable. For those who rely on the minimal or sometimes free tuition costs at

parish schools, private education is often out of reach. This leaves families few avenues to provide their children an education which is considerate of their Catholic identity.

There is, however, another choice: home schooling. Home education offers the same benefits, by way of religious education, as do Catholic schools. In addition, home schoolers also fare extremely well academically. Homeschooling allows for flexibility and customizability in education, while also giving parents the opportunity to be closer with their children. Yet I would guess that home schooling is not an option most readers of this article have considered.

Every year, thousands of American families decide to homeschool their children. It is one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the country, in 2007 numbering over 1 million making up around 2% of the school-age population (Isenberg). There are many reasons people make this choice: religious, political, social, and academic, to name a few. There are some homeschoolers who are driven by necessity, as in the case of military families who elect to homeschool rather than forcing their children to spend every year in a new school. Yet for all this diversity, the average person knows very little about the practice of home schooling. This is due, in large part, to the variety itself—by and large, there is no group one could single out as representative of home schoolers. As a result, people sometimes tend to identify home schooling with whatever types of homeschoolers they may have met. This accounts, in part, for the broad range of opinions on the matter. If nothing else, the people of the Diocese of Rochester deserve to be made fully aware of what routes are open to them.

Concerns and Misconceptions

Before moving on to the main benefits of home education, it is important to address some of the negative claims commonly made about home schooling. The foremost of these is invariably that home education robs children of adequate socialization with children of their own

age, forming young men and women who are unable to relate or interact effectively with others. Let's look at the basis for this assertion. The unavoidable fact is that children in public or private schools spend far more time with far more peers than do home schooled students. By contrast, homeschoolers tend to be better adjusted to interaction with older and younger children, as well as with adults. It cannot be denied that they are less "socialized" by the yard stick of peer interaction—but is this really the right way to measure socialization? The only context in which students are likely to be part of such homogenously aged groups is during their time in school. In the world outside, age differences are less important. In fact, according to Michael Romanowski, professor of education at Ohio Northwestern University, the age-centric focus of the K-12 school system may actually limit students' comfort level in engaging with older or younger individuals, particularly with adults. Romanowski believes that due to the freer, supportive structure of the home schooling atmosphere, homeschooled students "are able to engage socially in multiage situations with a high level of confidence" ("Common").

Another major challenge leveled at homeschooling is that it politically and ideologically secludes students to their parents' points of view, secluding them from the "real world." It is true that parents often seek refuge for their religious or political beliefs under the cover-all protection of homeschooling, and some go so far as to be totally isolated. These, however, are the minority. Most homeschooling parents do an excellent job in producing dedicated, civic-minded members of the community. Commenting on a recent study performed by Dr. Brian Ray, Romanowski declares, "It seems that homeschooling creates responsible and productive citizens, which is positive for both the individual and society. Children are benefiting from the homeschool environment and much can be learned from examining what homeschooling families are doing" ("Revisiting"). The numbers provided by Dr. Ray's study show homeschoolers to be well above

the national rate in measures of civic investment, soundly disproving the idea of homeschoolers as reclusive dissidents.

The Case in Favor: Ideological

Ideological freedom is one of the great appeals of home education, with religious ed being cited in virtually all sources as the factor which a majority of parents reported was primary in making their decision to homeschool. Religiously-characterized groups or organizations are extremely common in the homeschooling community, providing a support network. In the eyes of many homeschoolers, the manner in which schools approach social issues impinges on their parental ability to raise their children to their own ideals. Even at religious schools, sometimes parents feel the need to take a more active role in shaping their child, particularly their relationship with faith.

Such is the case with Professor Matthew Capdevielle, Director of the University Writing Center and Assistant Professor of the Practice in the Writing Program at the University of Notre Dame. Prof. Capdevielle and his wife, also a professor at Notre Dame, are, at the time of this publication, completing their first semester of homeschooling their three children. I recently had the opportunity to speak with Prof. Capdevielle regarding his and his wife's state of mind on homeschooling at this milestone, and their reasons for choosing homeschooling initially. "Our impression so far is extremely positive—we're very happy with how things are going," said Capdevielle. The couple's children had previously been attending a Christian Montessori school, where Capdevielle said the family was quite happy. It wasn't so much, he explained, that there was anything wrong with the school experience for their children. Rather, the Capdevielles wanted a larger say their children's education and formation, especially religiously. As the professor put it, "We wanted to be more involved in how our children learned about the fullness

of their Catholic faith. We just felt like we needed to be a bigger part of their lives.” While this semester was intended as something of a trial run, Professor Capdevielle said that he and his wife are feeling good about the experience, and are seriously considering finishing out the year, at the very least. Given that the academic legitimacy of homeschooling often comes under attack, the fact that a pair of professors at one of the nation’s top schools have chosen it for their own children is significant.

The opportunity to take a hands-on role in the education of one’s children is of a worthwhile one, especially in today’s ever more polarized climate. One way or another, parents are increasingly finding themselves in disagreement with school philosophies and policies on everything from politics to ethics to dress. For some, this is a major source of conflict with the school. For others, like the Capdevielles, the issue is not so much one of position as of degree—they simply wanted a more substantially Catholic education for their children. Either way, homeschooling offers a profoundly higher level of ideological freedom than conventional schooling. For members of the suddenly barren Diocese of Rochester, it may represent a good replacement for the Catholic schools which have been shut down. Certainly not all of those families previously enrolled at closed schools will feel the need to pursue religious education to such an extent. For those, however, to whom it is of great importance, homeschooling may be ideal.

The Case in Favor: Academics

Homeschooling does not offer merely political or religious freedom. It is also an excellent choice academically. Academics represent another of the main reasons to opt for home education. Furthermore, they may represent its biggest value. One way to see this is simply by looking at the teacher-student relationship. In any conventional school, even the best teacher will

be limited by the fact that he or she must teach to a group of students. This means lesson plans tend to be somewhat generalized, middle-of-the-road affairs, to ensure that every student can grasp them. The downside to this is that many students do not easily adjust their natural learning style and ability to this system. Because teachers are forced by necessity to aim for the average or typical student, kids who fall far to one or the other end of the spectrum may wind up being left out. This applies both to students who may have difficulty in that area and to those who are truly exceptional at that particular subject. In practice, most students have strengths and weaknesses. For the majority, these are in sufficient balance that traditional group lessons work out for them. Students with uneven abilities, on the other hand, often struggle. Homeschooling, on the other hand, eliminates this problem by dramatically improving the student/teacher ratio, oftentimes as far as one to one. This allows unrivalled personalization of curricula and teaching methods, tailoring education to a specific student's needs.

The advantage this customization provides is clearly supported by the statistics. A recent study done by Michael F. Cohen for the Journal of College Admission examined the college performance of public, private, Catholic, and homeschooled students. In almost all measured areas, homeschooled students significantly outperformed competition, including in ACT scores, GPA, and transfer credits. In particular, the college graduation rate for homeschooled students is impressive, 8% higher than the public school rate, and 15% higher than the rate for private schooled students. Furthermore, the results of a second study by Dr. Brian Ray indicate that homeschoolers consistently score in the mid to high eighties percentile range for the key disciplines of reading, language, math, science, and social studies. Furthermore, the "achievement gap" seen between children from wealthy families and those from poorer ones appears, based on Ray's results, to be much narrower in homeschoolers. Even when parents were

not college-educated, homeschooled students still scored in the eighty-third percentile (Smith). Between them, these studies show that homeschooling does an exceptional job in high school education, and preparing students for college. Homeschooling truly is a competitive academic option.

A Look at the Challenges

All these benefits, however, do not come without cost. Homeschooling is a challenge for both parents and children. The largest and most obvious obstacle is the time investment required. Full-time homeschooling usually requires one parent or the other to stay at home to teach. While some couples choose to take it in turn, as the Capdevielles, homeschooling requires a sacrifice no matter what. It is also an expensive undertaking. While by no means so pricey as private school, expenses add up: textbooks, supplies, and the other paraphernalia of school all come out of the parents' pockets. This totals thousands of dollars a year. In some states, there are tax breaks for homeschoolers, to account for the fact that they are not utilizing the public education for which they are obliged to pay for. Most, however, do not offer such considerations, which means that homeschoolers can wind up essentially paying for school twice. Finally, homeschoolers must battle popular stereotypes about their educational choice. Yet for all the challenge homeschooling entails, I can assure readers of *The Courier* that it is, doable, effective and rewarding.

One Student's Perspective

I often find that a personal look at homeschooling makes all the difference in helping people to understand and consider it as an option. I myself am in an excellent position to discuss the comparative benefits and difficulties of homeschooling—I was homeschooled from second grade through high school. The initial reason for my withdrawal from school was that I did not

fit with the established teaching method at my school. As I explained above, this can make it very hard for a student to learn in the school environment, and such was the case for me. My problem was that my reading skills were far in advance of my ability to write. I found myself bored in class, having already read the material, but continually tested into ever lower brackets because I could not write the answers to questions. As I was placed in easier groups, I grew increasingly unchallenged, to such a degree that my teacher obtained me a prescription for Ritalin, mistaking boredom for ADD. It was at this point, when I was about to be treated for a condition I did not have, that I left school.

The ensuing years were good to me. I was a reasonably bright kid, and, unhindered by daily schedules and routines (Consider how much time students spend waiting—waiting in line, waiting for attendance, waiting for class to start, waiting for lunch, etc. A homeschooled student has none of these demands on his time), I finished middle school at least one year ahead in most subjects. This allowed me a great deal of leeway in my high school education. I was able to focus on the liberal arts, which have always been my strong suit. By junior year, I had developed relationships with mentors at local colleges in history, English, and political science. Much of this would not have been possible without the freedom homeschooling offered. For instance, I became good friends with the head of the political theory department at Rochester Institute of Technology, auditing several of his courses and taking small-group seminars with him. I would never have been able to fit these into my schedule in a conventional school setting—certainly not in my junior year.

I knew I wanted to attend a good college, so good scores on my standardized tests were a necessity. Thankfully, my home education had prepared me very well for this hurdle. I did well on all my tests, and this, paired with the extracurriculars my homeschool experience permitted,

earned me the acceptance of many top universities. Thus the result of my education was that I had the pick of the field. I am currently completing my first semester at the University of Notre Dame, studying history and political science. I look upon my parents' decision to homeschool me with gratitude. Had they done otherwise, there is some doubt as to whether I would be where I am today. More likely, I would be attending a small local college, like most of my friends.

Taking a Course of Action

This article is by no means intended to suggest that homeschooling is the optimum solution for all students. It is not a panacea. Far from it. For a great many, the amount of self-direction required would be too difficult. Others might not want to make the investment of time and money. For these reasons and more, homeschooling is not for everyone. Those for whom it is the best choice, however, gain a tailor-made education, the ability to follow their interests more freely, and an upbringing in an ideologically consistent setting. For this reason, I am presenting the case for homeschooling to the families of the Diocese of Rochester. To those parents whose children are struggling in school, are not challenged enough, or who feel that what they learn in school is in conflict with what they hear at home, homeschooling may represent the best solution for their family. For mine, it proved a fateful decision, one which equipped me for success at an excellent school. I hope, then, that I have been able to reach even a few families left without a school by the recent shutdowns. You have more choices than you think.

Sincerely,

Connor --- [deleted by Clauss]

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