

## There's no place like home

*This fall, homeschooling is more popular than ever*

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In March, kids were sent home from school for the remainder of the academic year. Stay safe, at home, parents were told. Six months later, the virus remains ever-present, but the official advice is that it's time to come back to class.

Not everyone is buying it.

Homeschooling has long been an available, viable option, and there are a wide variety of reasons a family might choose to craft and implement their own curriculum. Now, in the face of COVID-19, families are adding health and the medical status of household members to the reasons for not sending kids back to the traditional school model.

For one local mom, Tess Mitchell of Cranston, the virus was her chief motivator. Mitchell and her husband Dan are parents to boys ages 5 and 4, and 18-month-old twins. Two years ago, Dan left his job to stay with the children, and recently Tess was furloughed from her copyediting and social media position with a company in the insurance sector. They had planned on sending their two older sons to a local Catholic school, but the tuition hit no longer made sense with everyone at home. And, like many families, there were other factors to consider.

"I have Multiple Sclerosis, my father has Parkinson's, and my father-in-law is about to turn 80," Tess said.

Under the circumstances, Tess started to look into homeschooling, and found several local Facebook groups. "I got a lot of great feedback and advice," she said. "They gave me confidence and made me realize, holy cow, I can do this."

### Facebook is packed with advice

Tess isn't alone. There are burgeoning numbers of people joining groups, notably on Facebook, that serve as hubs of information, and a window into the questions, concerns, and jitters that would-be homeschooling parents — moms, mostly — are facing. Groups like Facebook's "RI Home Schooling and Unschooling" are full of posts that speak volumes about what parents are thinking about this process:

"Please tell me I'm not the only one trying to homeschool with a full-time job."

"I am not comfortable enough with RIDE's guidelines to send them (to school)."

"Any other moms looking to have a meet up and socialize?"

"Any recommendations for homeschooling a foreign lan-



RICHARD W. DIONNE JR.

Marcia Sirois and her son, Nathan, 7, work on a nature study at their backyard picnic table.

guage?"

While there are seemingly a mountain of questions from the uninitiated, there are just as many answers, and the support is invaluable for those new to the process of everything from submitting letters of intent to hometown school districts, to developing a robust curriculum, to following through with mandated reporting requirements.

"I was overwhelmed at first," admits Tess. Then minutes after being accepted into another Facebook group, "New England Happy Homeschoolers," she was inundated with actionable advice and great ideas. She also recommends looking into homeschooling pods, which can address one of the biggest concerns people have about homeschooling: socialization.

### Getting social in the real world

One local resource that Tess strongly recommends is ENRICHri, Rhode Island's largest secular homeschooling support group. An all-volunteer nonprofit, ENRICHri provides support and guidance for local homeschooling families through Introduction to Homeschooling workshops; answering questions about letters of intent, attendance requirements, progress reports, mid-year withdrawals, and working with your school district; and a forum to discuss learning at home, curriculum questions, unschooling



Nathan Sirois looks for insects while his helping his mother, Marcia, pick vegetables in their backyard garden.

and life as a homeschooling family.

ENRICHri has an Advocacy Team that provides several important series, including gathering and

disseminating information about homeschooling; protecting homeschool interests; reviewing all district school committee agendas and minutes, alerting district homeschoolers with any policy concerns; attending school committee meetings when neces-

sary to support homeschool freedoms; and watching for legislation that could affect homeschoolers.

They also offer "Learn on Location Experiences" at museums, historic sites, parks, civic locations, theatre and musical performances, playground meetups, nature sanctuaries and much more.

### From home-school to college

Marcia Sirois, a Warren native

(her parents own Frerichs Farm) and Riverside resident, is a volunteer with ENRICHri, directing their Public Relations department. A longtime homeschooler, she began homeschooling her older son, now 19, when he was in the seventh grade. Her younger son Nathan, age 7, has been homeschooled from the beginning.

"My older son was distracted in large classrooms, and I was at a loss," she said. "I saw a notice in the East Providence paper about a free class offered by ENRICHri and I decided to attend. It was the best decision for our family."

Her older son was able to pursue his interest in Japanese language and culture, and has been studying at Roger Williams University, with the hope of some day working in Japan. "He got his self-confidence back," said Marcia. "It gave him the opportunity to enjoy learning and the time and freedom to find and pursue his passions."

In her work as PR head of ENRICHri, Marcia is seeing an explosion of interest in their group. "We have about 350 member families today, up from about 270 a year ago," she said. "Normally we will have 10 to 15 new families sign up each month; we had 77 in July, and are expecting even more by the end of August."

A \$30 annual membership fee