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Families take a DIY approach to homeschooling

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(Photo: Graham Washatka/For Post-Crescent Media)

Pinterest, a virtual bulletin board of inspiration, is the ideal hangout for do-it-yourselfers hunting for recipes, crafts and decorating ideas.

It's also so much more.

Families involved in home-based instruction say Pinterest is just one of their go-to tools in their teaching handbag.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, from the 2012-13 school year through the 2013-14 school year, students enrolled in home-based instruction increased 3.47 percent, from 18,464 children to

19,104.

Parents in the Fox Valley are finding homeschooling more accessible thanks to technology and better networking opportunities.

Anne Jungwirth of Appleton started homeschooling her children last year. As mom to five boys — Tommy, 14, Jacob, 12, Carsten, 9, Grayson, 6, and Charlie, 2 — she said she and husband Thomas observed that certain parts of her children's academic life could benefit from homeschooling. While she gave the concept a thought back when her oldest was in second grade, the opportunities technology provided helped ease the transition.

"The resources out there are limitless, really — from actual publishers' websites to Pinterest," Jungwirth said. "I actually use Pinterest a great deal. If I'm looking for curriculum for second-graders or I'm looking for curriculum helpers, I can go onto Pinterest and find a ton of articles that can help me. And they're even curriculum specific. If people are using the same curriculum I am, and they supplement with imaginative things, they'll post them and I can use them if I think they'll work for me."

Mia Peterson and her husband, Kris, of Menasha have homeschooled their children Zachary, 13, and Cade, 11, since 2006. She said the access to information has made teaching much easier over the years.

"We're really in this DIY culture, where more and more people are taking on things that maybe before they weren't confident they could do," Peterson said. "Homeschooling may be in more of a spotlight because there's more information out there for people to become educated about it. And then you've got the confidence building in this DIY culture. What's more DIY than homeschooling? People also have more connections socially with Facebook so they can see the results of homeschooling; they can see the kids."

Paul Trelc and his wife, Kathy, of Appleton have homeschooled their four children since 2003. Trelc was recently named the board chairman of the Valley Home Schoolers, a Christ-centered community that promotes and supports homeschool education.

"Technology has helped the homeschool movement tremendously," Trelc said. "In fact, it may be another important reason for our growth. There are many up-and-coming online teaching programs. We have one right here in Appleton called Freedom Project Education, which my daughter will attend as a junior this year. Our family has five Kindles, two iPads and four computers to support the technology component of our homeschool."

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There are many resources available online for independent and tutor-supported teaching for all subjects from math and sciences to literature, writing, grammar and history, he said.

"The Internet has also introduced us to camps, seminars, conferences, online schools and many other paid and free resources that we would have never known without it," Trelec said.

Athletic opportunities also have grown in the homeschooling realm.

"Now (VHS) has girls' volleyball teams, boys' basketball and cross-country," Peterson said. "With the growth of community athletic opportunities outside of the school setting, a lot of homeschoolers are also in soccer clubs, for example. It's a growing thing, and it's so positive to see it go from nothing to something."

Networking through the various interests of the children, Trelec said, is an important connection to other families.

"We also have some people in VHS, some of whom are new to the area, who have really strengthened our cooperative programs including National Christian Forensics and Communications Association and Classical Conversations. We also have families who have done great work building a competitive team for robotics."

Increased opportunities for families are helping homeschooling shed the stereotypes, Jungwirth said.

"Homeschooling used to be thought of as you're teaching your family and you're pretty much on an island by yourself," she said. "And that's just not the case, at least in our community. ... I realized that, yes, I can do this. It's not outside my ability. Anyone can do this with support. It's wonderful to know I'm not on an island by myself."

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