

Kitchen Classrooms

An increasing number of parents are teaching their children at home

By **Melanie Threlkeld McConnell**

When the three Forrey children go off to school each morning they don't have to walk far—just down the stairs to the family's spacious kitchen table.

There's no place like home to live or learn, say parents Melissa and Dave Forrey, both BSU grads. They designed their rambling two-story house on 40 acres of rural Ada County countryside with home schooling in mind.

"I wanted to have enough room in the kitchen for maps and storage space for books and different areas for the kids to study," says Melissa, mother of Keiko, 14, and Mark and Kim, both 10. She also added a separate music room and a computer room, which the children use for writing, book making and research.

With the advent of improved curriculum and educational technology, the Forreys are among a growing number of families in Idaho and across the country who are teaching their children at home. State home-school coordinators say there are more than 4,000 Idaho home-schooled students. But it's a trend that's not so unusual.

"There is a long tradition of people learning at home or learning at church. Many people a century and a half ago learned to read at church by reading the Bible and religious material," says Robert Barr, dean of BSU's College of Education. "In some ways we've come full circle. Just a few generations ago, there were not a lot of schools in this country."

Parents say they home school because they want a learning environment for their children that is devoid of disruptive students, drugs, inappropriate language and behavior and overcrowding. They want an intellectually challenging environment that fosters a love of learning, where their children may work at their own pace and don't fear asking questions.

"I want my kids to enjoy learning and I want them to remember the material I'm giving them," says Melissa Forrey.

Geri Tilman, who founded the Idaho Coalition of Home Educators in 1992, agrees: "[Kids] can't slip through the cracks because mom is standing at the kitchen table," she says. "If that child does not understand fractions, mom knows."

Tilman and her husband, state Rep. Fred Tilman (R-Boise) home schooled their son Mark, now 20, at his request after sending him to private and public schools. They found home schooling to be a natural setting in which their son could learn. "In most other education processes they use an institutional setting," says Fred Tilman, who has helped pass school-choice legislation. "In a home-school environment it's more a tutorial, one-on-one setting or method."

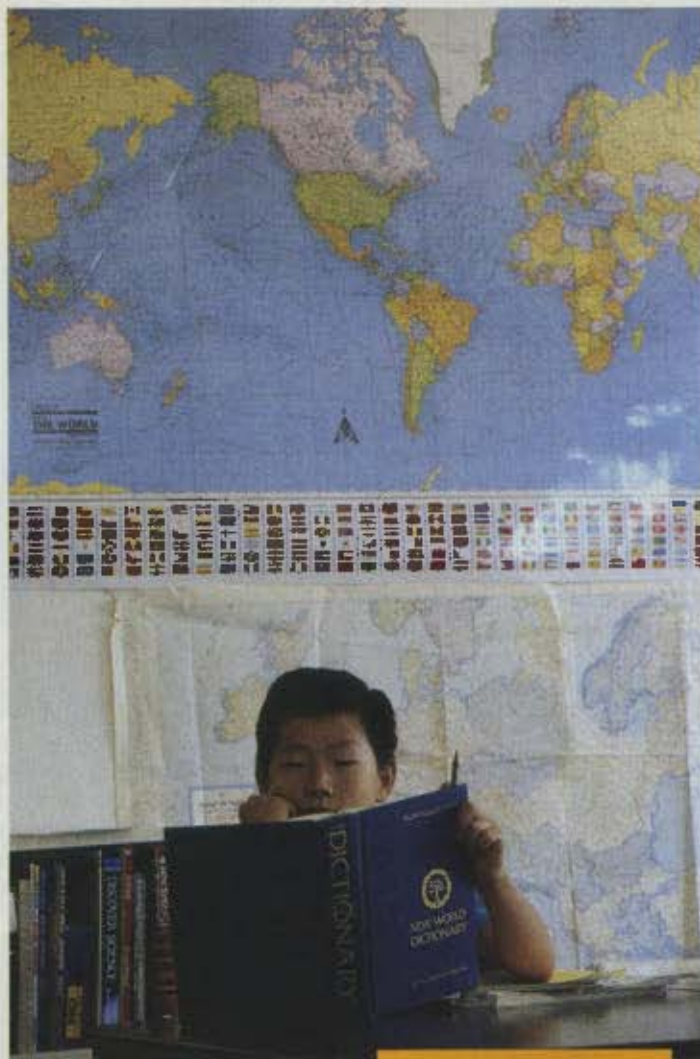
For Mark Tilman, now a business management student at Boise State with a 3.9 grade-point average, home schooling was just a matter of preference. "I basically got along fine at [public and private] school. This just appealed to me a lot more," he says. "I thought I would be able to learn things more effectively. Home schooling is one-on-one tutorial, the ultimate student-teacher ratio. There's more flexibility and freedom to be able to say, 'Hey I want to study castles,' if that's what I happen to be interested in at the time. I could do that because it was just me, it wasn't a whole classroom."

He adjusted to college fine, he says, after an initial fear of the unknown.

"I would be one of maybe three students

in the whole class who would interact with the professor," he says. "It puzzled me that so many students wouldn't ask questions. It was like they were afraid. I guess I never was afraid of asking a dumb question."

The availability of quality curriculum and technology make home schooling easier and more successful. For example, you can pur-



Mark Forrey feeds his mind as well as body in the family's kitchen.

chase chemistry sets, a cow's eye for dissecting, maps, globes, textbooks, workbooks and educational computer software programs all from a number of Boise- and Meridian-area school supply stores. Dictionaries and encyclopedias are also available on CD-ROM disks.

"In the past there were a few workbooks," says John Kirtland, owner of Idaho Book & School Supply in Garden City. "Companies have come to realize [home schooling] is a force to be reckoned with. They're cranking out products daily to meet that need. But the biggest change is the number of companies putting out products. They continue to improve and find new ways to teach these kids what they need to know to survive."

One other way is through video home

schooling, says Larry Reitz, state chairman of the Idaho Coalition of Home Educators. For the price of the six-subject course, parents receive a video of a private-school classroom. The home-school kids can hear the teacher and the questions asked by the other students. "It's not just a camera set up in the back of the classroom," says Reitz.

"The teacher is catering not only to the students in the classroom but to the students at home." The student receives the benefit of hearing a teacher while learning at home at his or her own pace. "It's a little bit more interactive than just sitting down reading a book," says Reitz.

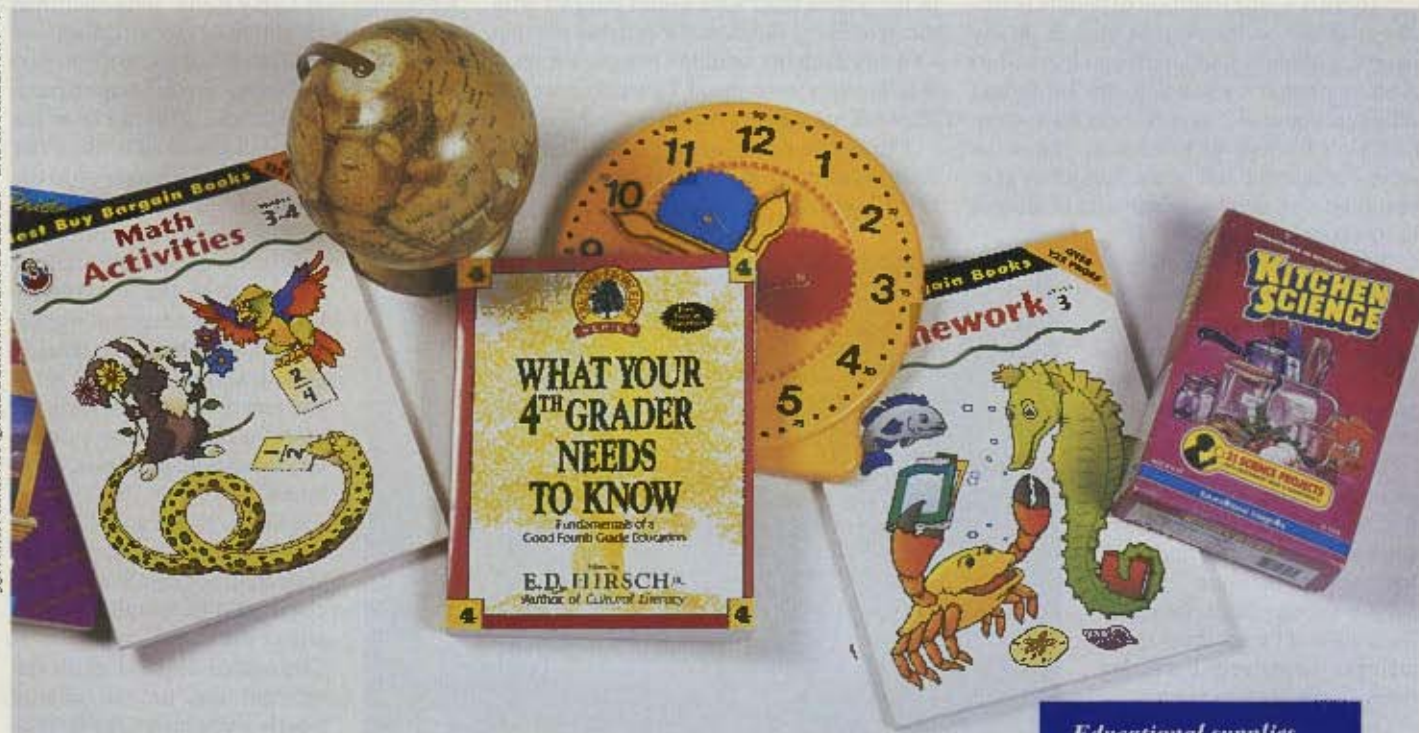
Reitz says he and his wife chose the ninth-grade video for their child because they weren't comfortable teaching high school subjects.

Increased curriculum development has helped Elaine Garris, owner of Scientific Wizardry in Boise, expand her line of educational toys and supplies. "When we first opened, almost exclusively all of our products came from Europe because there were no American suppliers of goods or hands-on toys," she says. Interestingly, most of the new products, she says, come from small-family suppliers, likely home schoolers who saw a need for the product.

Cynthia Sciscoe, owner of Curriculum Cottage in Meridian, says she's able to suggest educational materials to her customers based on personal use. She and her husband home school their six children, using their business as an additional teaching tool. Sciscoe says the increased demand for home-school supplies goes beyond Idaho. She is adding on to her store and expanding her nationwide mail-order business.

All three suppliers say they've seen an increase in the number and variety of people who are choosing to home school. Some want a religion-based curriculum, while others want to tailor the curriculum to their child's interests. Others want to home school their child because he or she needs special attention and might otherwise be a disturbance in a traditional classroom.

"I have new home schoolers come in every single day," Garrison says. "And it's a real broad spectrum of people. The thing about home schooling is you can take a child's interest and tailor a curriculum so that interest is leading the learning."



Educational supplies such as books, CD-ROM disks, software and games are plentiful.

New technology, educators say, could be the most important factor that affects the education of all children. Fred Tilman, who spent 26 years in the telephone industry before taking early retirement, says he's watched the rapid pace of changing technology.

"What you're going to find is that by using technology you can bring the world to that student at home," he says. "As long as a person can access that information and is taught how to make value decisions about that information, that's really what an educated person is."

Tilman says he envisions a future where children attend a classroom once a week and work at home using technology. It's a scene, he says, very similar to how their parents may spend their working day. "When you look at all the hassles in people's lives, like baby sitters, parking — so much of the time you can do the majority of the work at home and connect with the office [through technology]," he says.

Barr agrees: "The same things that are driving individuals now to work out of their home — fax machines, modem, 800 numbers — are opening new opportunities for students," he says. "You don't need schools in the same way that you once did because you can access this incredible wealth of information out there. In some ways, the level of communication through technology is richer than even in a classroom."

But what worries Barr is that not all children have the financial means for an education outside the traditional public school system.

"My biggest concern about the concept of home schooling is that it's like private school," he says. "It only serves those who are able to do it. For people who are poor, people who are illiterate, people who are teen-age parents, people who are single parents who have to work, for those people, perhaps the most needy in our society, they have no option for home schooling."

'My biggest concern about the concept of home schooling is that it's like private school. It only serves those who are able to do it.'

And less support from educated, financially stable families likely means less money and more problems for public schools, he adds. "The criticism is ... that by withholding their support from public education, they're abandoning public schools more and more to people who are poor," he says. "And then the classes are larger and there are more at-risk kids. That ultimately creates a problem

for us all."

Families who home school say they're building tighter family bonds and helping their kids to develop a strong work ethic, especially when the family has a home-based business or is self-employed. But giving families the choice to choose their child's means of education is what is important, Fred Tilman says. "I'm absolutely convinced that the process is very, very effective," he says. "Nobody knows their children better than their parents."

For the Forreys, Tilmans and other home-schooling families, they're committed to teaching their children their way, in an environment they control. Two of the three Forrey children wrote and published books with the help of their home computer. The professional-looking publications are complete with photos and biographies of the young authors.

For Keiko Forrey, the hours she is allowed to practice her cello have paid off. She won a spot with the Boise Philharmonic this fall. Her parents are convinced it's because of her learning environment.

"Home schooling is something that enhances a kid's worth," says Dave Forrey. "Self-confidence comes from achievement. We feel the kids can gain real knowledge rather than get grades." □