

The Virus Makes Homeschoolers of Us All

By Matthew Hennessey

Many families have found themselves running pop-up homeschools. Most students will return to traditional classrooms when the crisis passes. But some families—perhaps many—will come away from this involuntary experiment with a new appreciation for home-based education. They may even decide that homeschooling is not only a plausible option, but a superior one.

When the scope of the Covid-19 epidemic became clear, and mayors and governors started closing schools, you could feel a collective sense of panic rising among the nation's parents. Some schools sent kids home with a week's worth of work and a promise to check in. Others quickly set up virtual classrooms using Zoom, Google Hangouts and other online meeting apps. Some simply said: *Good luck. We'll see you in a few weeks.*

The newly minted home-

schoolers had questions. How long will this last? What are they expected to do? As they flocked to social media looking for scheduling guidance and emotional reassurance, they found a cornucopia of curricular options. An economy of high-quality online educational materials has sprouted in the

Education has long been resistant to change, but it can't dodge the pandemic.

past decade. All you need is a laptop, headphones and a quiet corner of the house, and your kid can study everything from calculus to ancient Greek.

Homeschoolers like my wife and me have known about these options for a while. It's possible for a teenager to do college-prep work in a comfortable, low-pressure environment free of vaping, bullying, emotional warfare, peer pres-

sure and the other social dysfunctions that thrive wherever the young congregate.

Parents may be anxious about spending so much face time with grumpy, hormonal teenagers. But most adolescent attitude is socially acquired. After a few weeks of homeschooling, parents may find they like their kids much better. As the attitudes adjust, they may see academic progress too.

This moment has been a long time coming. Our lives are far different today than 25 or 50 years ago, but schools haven't changed much. In many places they've incorporated iPads, smartboards, class websites, and the like, but those are merely tools; the educational blueprint is essentially the same as it was in 1900.

Children are divided by age group into grades, seated in rows, and taught by a credentialed teacher who stands facing them like an orchestra conductor. Lessons are delivered in 35-minute morsels. Never mind if things are going well—when the bell rings the learning is

over. This is an Industrial Age model of education. It's a poor fit for the Internet Era.

Education has managed to stave off innovation for a variety of reasons. Inertia is one—most people have a hard time reimagining something as basic as school. Some might argue, fairly, that it's unwise to conduct a large-scale experiment on the nation's children. Teachers unions are politically strong and uninterested in anything that threatens their power.

But now the pandemic is forcing us to behave almost as if an asteroid were hurtling toward the earth. An existential threat can shake up the established order in unexpected ways. Maybe the coronavirus can succeed where Silicon Valley has failed. If more Americans come to see the viability and value of home education, it could be a silver lining in a very dark cloud.

Mr. Hennessey is the Journal's deputy editorial features editor.