A huge thank you to all the families who agreed to speak to me about this subject! It was great to hear so many stories from the people who have explored the ups and downs of part-time school education.

I enjoyed talking to you all, and thanks also to those – both named and anonymous – who are quoted in this article.

Writing an article for *Otherways* is a bit like a coming-out process. Yup folks, that’d be me, exposing myself again to all my peers.

So, here we go, everybody: I educate my kids at home. But that’s not all. Four times a week for an hour or so, one of my kids puts on a school uniform – yes, a school uniform - and trots off to be taught by some other people as well. That’s right: I, a die-hard home educator, am a part-time school mum as well.

This leads to some amusing situations at times. For example, my daughters aren’t overly concerned about what they wear. In addition, the one who goes to school part-time doesn’t attach any particular meaning to the uniform, so she usually doesn’t bother to change out of it (fortunately it’s just a school polo shirt and jeans) when she’s not at school. That means she wears school uniform for four days a week, but she still very definitely identifies as being home educated. So when shop assistants ask, ‘No school today?’ and the kids reply, ‘We don’t go to school’ –well, let’s just say we get some EXTRA funny looks sometimes!

In Victoria, at least, part-time schooling has never been illegal, but nor was it formalised in any way until relatively recently. Some families were able to come to quiet little arrangements with their local schools, but most of these were necessary to accommodate the special needs of some students. In a very few cases, some enlightened schools were happy to accept and work in with home educators, with children attending on a part-time basis or only for certain times during the year.

That all changed with the new Education and Training Act in 2006. Not only was home education formalised, but part-time school attendance (in the Act it’s referred to as ‘Partial Enrolment’) was formalised as well. This has led to more schools, families and students becoming aware of the possibility of part-time schooling.

A quick summary of the finer details of partial enrolment are:

- Registered home schooling students are eligible to apply to the principal of their local school for enrollment;
- The principal can decline to accept a student where reasonable grounds exist (the example given for ‘reasonable grounds’ is that the class or year level is full);
- Partially enrolled students are expected to comply with all the school-level policies, for example the wearing of school uniform, unless negotiated with the principal (the example given is of a student enrolled for the sports program being exempted from the wearing of normal school uniform);
- Extra activities like camps, concerts, out-of-school hours care and the like are all negotiated on a case-by-case basis;
- The school gets a pro-rata payment for part-time students, according to the time fraction of school attendance;
- Students with disabilities may be eligible for aide funding;
- Students will receive reports about their progress in the areas they are enrolled, and are expected to be at school for the times they have negotiated.

So, that's the legal stuff dealt with. But what about the nitty-gritty? Does it work for those families on the ground, dealing with part-time school right here and now? Is it really possible to have all of the benefits of home education, coupled with the best of school? Let’s have a closer look at the big wide world of part-timing.

From my examination of the issue, and discussions with families, I've come to the conclusion that the success of any part-time schooling arrangement really seems to depend on how the three elements in the equation – ie, the child, the school and the family – fit together. And that, of course, is just a long-winded way of saying: ‘It all depends’.

The Child

I suspect that part-time school can work well if you are
seeking a specialist subject, particularly at high school level. In our family’s case, it happens that we have a music-mad child and we live in a rural area, with no easily accessible youth orchestras or bands. Not only that, but in our nearest big town is a secondary school with a large music centre.

Now, we all know that home education is an education for both parent and child alike, and the words, ‘I don’t know, but I’m sure we can find out’ will be repeated many times during the home education journey. However, when it comes to educating myself enough to provide guidance in the finer points of learning a brass instrument and a string instrument, not to mention collecting, leading and resourcing a youth orchestra and a string ensemble – naaah, I’ve got better things to do with my time, like dropping my child at school and heading to the nearest café.

However, for our daughter, her part-time school life is pretty unlike school. For one thing, music is optional, so she’s in the company of other kids who are keen musicians as well. For another thing, she doesn’t have any classroom time. And in addition, the music centre isn’t even in the same building as the rest of the school. When I take her there, it feels just like I’m dropping her at a youth music centre. Which, of course, is exactly what it is.

And for us, the die-hard home educators, the fact that it is a huge school also helps. That may sound strange, but I suspect that when you have more than a thousand students there will already be a number of creative arrangements in place for quite a few families. When I approached the school they were very quick to agree to the arrangement, and the music teachers are great at keeping us in the loop about timetable arrangements and the like.

One benefit of part-time school is that some home-ed activities can still continue. One parent I spoke to, Jude Parsons, felt that this helped a part-time arrangement suit her son, who had always been educated at home and wanted to try school for the first time at the age of 12. However, he also didn’t want to miss out on his home-ed activities and friendships. ‘He was really clear that he wanted to try school, but was very pleased that it didn’t have to be an all-or-nothing situation,’ she said.

Another family in a similar situation, with kids who had never previously attended school, felt that AYCE (Access Yea Community Education, run through Yea High School) was a good fit for their children and many others. ‘Yes, it’s school, but the whole structure is that the kids attend only one or two days a week, which suits us perfectly,’ said the mother. ‘We still do our normal home-ed activities on the other days.’

Of course the flip-side of this is that part-time school may not suit highly social children, who may worry about missing out on friendships which are made at school when they aren’t there, or the special events such as excursions, speakers, theme days and the like. Some kids are just not suited to anything other than a full-on approach to anything they try. Any child who will sit at school stressing about what they are missing out on in their home-ed world, but who will also stress if they are missing out on school, may simply not thrive with a part-time arrangement.

There are, of course, many paths to part-time schooling. Instead of coming to it from a home-ed position, some children come to it from full-time school attendance, or as a planned transition to full-time school. Others find it ends up being a route to home education, with a number of families I spoke to commenting that they tried a part-time arrangement when they realised that their children weren’t thriving in school, and then realised that the kids were better off on the days they were at home. One mother I spoke to found that she actually took one path while thinking she’d follow another. ‘Part-time school really didn’t work for my twins when they started school,’ said Emma Harper, who has twin boys now aged eight, and a younger son, six. ‘I really didn’t think school was right for them, but everyone was telling me that they should be there, so I thought going part-time for the first year would make it easier on them. I’ve never seen the boys as miserable as on the days they went to school and, by the end of the year, we’d decided that they wouldn’t return.’

For some kids, part time home school comes about for health reasons. There is a theory about parenting that says that children have a way of making sure we parent them in precisely the way they need. Some children are simply so miserable in school that they are sick much of the time, with their stress being expressed in a range of health conditions that at times means they become part-time school attendees by default. Of course some of these children end up being educated at home full-time, with many parents saying that the way the kids thrived during school holidays made it an easy decision to make.

The School
This goes without saying really, but the school has to be an accommodating one. And that doesn’t mean a school where the staff say, ‘Oh, well, I suppose we’ll have to let you in.’ It means that if you are going to look at a school
for your children to attend part-time, the staff need to be totally happy with the arrangement.

There are all sorts of schools out there. Some are very welcoming, while others could politely be described as ‘doozies’. Friends of ours approached their local school, a small rural one, for their three children to be involved in the Active After School program. Unfortunately they received an extraordinarily frosty response from the principal whose words were, ‘As a representative of the Education Department it is my duty to inform you that your kids really should be in school.’ The mother says, ‘I did hear on the grapevine that she’s left the school since then, but it really put us off trying again, and now the kids are involved in other sporting clubs anyway.’

In contrast, our school has been totally accepting of a part-time arrangement. I remember picking up the phone to make my first enquiry, with a feeling of ‘Okay, here we go, this is just the start of a long negotiating process.’ Well, I was wrong. I put the phone down just a few minutes later with a huge sigh of relief. The answer was, ‘No worries, we’ll send you an enrollment form, and look, we’d really appreciate it if she wore a uniform when she’s here’. Apart from two phone calls during the first week when they were checking that she really wasn’t meant to be in the classroom, we’ve had nothing but support.

However, even when staff are completely accepting of a part-time arrangement, some problems can still occur. Emma Lewis tried part-time schooling for four of her eight children at the start of 2009. The arrangement, despite goodwill on both sides, lasted only a week before she pulled them out. ‘It was like we were speaking a different language,’ said Emma, who said she could tell the school was keen to make it work. ‘For example, I made it clear that I didn’t want the children tested. When I arrived to pick them up one day, the teacher told me that she’d tested them in English and Maths but had told the children that the results didn’t matter. She genuinely thought she was accommodating us, but she didn’t understand where I was coming from at all. And this was a teacher who we knew was ‘on our side’ and happy to have our family there.’

Emma’s plan was to have her children attend for things like music, art and foreign language activities. ‘I actually thought, ‘What can go wrong with music and art?’ she said. ‘But it soon became apparent that there is a fundamental philosophical difference between home education and school, and that even in the more creative subjects there was a huge element of structure, some clear ‘school-type’ behaviour messages, and a lack of creativity.’

Another thing that some families mentioned is that having done all the hard work in nurturing a relationship with a school, when staff changes occurred, the hard work had to be done all over again. ‘People tend to think that the school itself has a sort of flavour – accepting, or strict, or alternative or whatever – and they forget that a school is actually at any time a big collection of individuals, and every teacher and child contributes to the flavour of that school. What seems like a good fit between family and school can suddenly turn into a really bad fit when there are staff changes,’ commented one parent.

Special school events are also well worth keeping in mind when approaching a school. Even my friends who are committed full-time school parents sometimes find the event calendar of schools exhausting to keep up with. For part-time school families, they add another layer of decision-making. One approach would be to stick tightly to the negotiated days or sessions, another would be to go for the extra events as well as other school hours, and yet another would be to allow the child to decide on a case-by-case basis, if acceptable to the school, of course. Some principals may even agree to the child attending school only for the special events. It’s all negotiable, and will really depend on the needs and interests of the child.

The Family

This is a big one. For die-hard home educators like myself, actually approaching a school at all, much less dropping your child at the school gate can be a difficult experience. And I’m not the only one. ‘It took me some time to feel okay about the idea of our son going to school,’ commented Jude Parsons. ‘My partner, Steve, was more philosophical about it, pointing out that if we were going to bring our kids up to think for themselves, then we would have to support them when they do. But I felt concerned, and quite sad as well. However, given our son’s desire to try school, and our desire to continue home educating, part-time enrolment provided a workable solution. It was actually the principal who suggested that we look at a part-time arrangement, and it was a huge relief to find that we didn’t have to commit ourselves to full-time school.’

Despite some concerns about school, once a good arrangement has been negotiated, some families, ourselves included, find that it’s very exciting to satisfy a keen child’s interest. Our whole family really enjoys the pleasure our daughter has in music, just like we enjoy the pleasure our other daughter has in her interests. While I’ll still confess to a touch of the ‘school shudders’, I’m also happy to say that I’m delighted with the way it’s going for her. And I’m also very pleased at the way the school has accepted our family and our education style.

But we’re a home educating family, with a small dash of school thrown in. That’s not the case for some parents, who commented that having their kids at school part-time meant that the family as a whole didn’t really get into the home-ed world, yet they weren’t really school families, either. That was reflected in the experience of some children, who found it hard to fully be in either realm when they were there. And there are plenty of reasons why children may find it hard to straddle both worlds. ‘It was really sad to walk into the grade one classroom and see all the kids engaged in a craft activity, but see my child at a table by herself finishing something the others had done the day before,’ said one mother. ‘I realised then that part-time schooling made it difficult for her on the days she was actually in school, and that she needed to be
either totally in or totally out. Otherwise, she wasn’t going to have the full benefits of either type of education.’

A part-time arrangement may also not be successful if it’s arranged in response to other people’s concerns, and doesn’t really represent what is happening for that family at that time. Some parents have found that they’ve had pressure from relatives to put their children in school part-time, in order to achieve perceived educational outcomes. Family pressure, as we all know, can be extremely painful and difficult to withstand. But school, particularly at the early levels, is often not that compartmentalised. For example, a student who attends for the ‘literacy’ timeslot will find that they may or may not be doing literacy that day. Schools don’t by any means manage to keep all of their students up to the grade level standard anyway, and part-time enrolment is definitely not a ‘magic bullet’ which can fix academic concerns.

Cynthia McStephen is a home-educating mother living in East Gippsland. Four times a week for about an hour, she morphs into a school mum. She finds the experience challenging at times, but she always enjoys the coffee.

And finally

Every family is different, and each home education situation is different. The same goes for part-time schooling arrangements. Everyone reading this article knows that home education takes a fair bit of thinking about. Well school education takes a fair bit of thinking about, too. Combine them, and you have quite a lot to consider! Just bear in mind that if you are going to educate your children at home, AND slot them into the school system at the same time, it’s essential that the three elements of child, family and school are a pretty good mix.

If you are considering partial enrollment, you’d be well served to check out this website: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/enrolling/homeschool.htm#4

Home Ed Teen End of Year Ball

Saturday 27th November 2010 7.30pm – 11.30pm

Required Dress: Cocktail Wear/Semi Formal

Invite your friends!

NO ALCOHOL

Get yourselves some moves!

Attend a Marshere Teen Social on any Tuesday before the Ball for HALF PRICE! Ball ticket purchase required for half price. You can attend as many Teen Socials as you want for $10 each time. Pay your $10 to attend any Tuesday, 7:30 – 9:30 and have lots of fun while learning some fun new steps.

Learn Swing, Rumba, Salsa, Cha Cha, Mambo and more!

Venue:
Marshere Dance Studio
200 Rooks Road
Nunawading

Ball Tickets: Ph Jenni 0409 163 372
Please note: Pre-purchase preferred
Social Enquiries: Melanie 9874 8711

Parents: This is a Home Ed Teen Event and will be supervised by Home Ed Parents. If you are more comfortable staying at the venue, you are welcome to do so.
The Lead Up to Part-time Home-schooling

In mid 2008 our son, Harry, was assessed as being dyslexic. At this time he was attending a government primary school (full time) and was in Grade Three (aged 8). His educational needs were not being fully met.

During late 2008, we had a balustrade added to our front veranda. The builder noticed Harry’s fascination in watching him work. Harry asked him many questions, which were happily answered.

Later, I asked this builder if he saw many children just as enthusiastic about building as Harry was. He replied that he didn’t really. He said that Harry showed a particularly high interest in the whole process. This struck me as intriguing. We chatted until our conversation led to a life-changing moment. He mentioned that his wife had home-schooled his two children, who were now in their late teens. His wife is a qualified teacher, however, they chose not to send their children to school. They have a strong Christian faith. This was partly their reason for wanting to home-school their children. They wanted to instil such character values as integrity, compassion and respect, as well as many other things, in their children as part of their education.

It was during this conversation that I realised our son didn’t fit the mould of the school system. Everything this builder was telling me suited Harry. His own children work at their own pace. His son works better in the morning and his daughter better in the afternoons. They have the freedom to direct their own learning. Their mother simply acts as a facilitator for their own curiosity. She guided them more when they were young, but now they virtually teach themselves.

The builder gave me his home number and invited me to call his wife to discuss home-schooling. I did this, and spent over two hours chatting with her. She was so honest and really inspired me.

Following this discussion, I mentioned the possibility of home-schooling to my husband. He was interested by it and I did further research over the next few months. I visited a home-schooling family, who took the time to show me exactly what they did on a daily basis. I felt privileged to be granted this ‘behind-the-scenes’ access pass. I will always remember their kindness.

My understanding of what home-schooling could offer our son was growing in a very positive way.

Back at school it had become obvious that our son learnt best in a one-to-one teaching environment. For instance, while in Grade One, he had attended a reading recovery program with great success. In Grade Two, he did speech therapy, which partly bridged the academic gap between himself and his peers. (These programs were at no cost to us). In these tailored sessions he thrived on the individual contact.

Midway through Grade Three, we invested in weekly private tutoring, independently of the school. This environment eliminated the high noise levels and constant distractions of the classroom. Harry’s daydreaming decreased. I stayed in these sessions. For two terms, I watched Harry work well, but he wasn’t making any significant advances. Writing was still difficult for him. Reading was becoming less of a struggle.

Time to Try Something Different

At the end of 2008, upon request, Harry’s teacher openly stated that the classroom environment was not suited to his learning style. She respectfully allowed him the freedom to direct their own learning. Their mother simply acts as a facilitator for their own curiosity. She guided them more when they were young, but now they virtually teach themselves.

Starting on the Path of Part-time Schooling

When I approached our Principal at the end of 2008, mentioning our desire to home-school our son for term one, 2009, she was shocked. It was the first time anyone had requested this. To her credit she tried to be encouraging. Her two main concerns were that Harry’s socialisation skills would suffer and he’d find it difficult to adapt to term two’s timetable. (I’d implied we’d try this for term one only, to get our son up to speed). This was uncharted territory for both of us.
Negotiating a Timetable

At the beginning of 2009, the Principal and I discussed how best to make this work. She was very accommodating. She preferred we send him each morning for numeracy and literacy. However, mornings were his best working hours. He’d be exhausted in the afternoons with me.

I met with Harry’s class teacher whom he adored. She was a young and vibrant person. He often gave her hugs in the schoolyard. I’d helped in class over the years, so I’d gotten to know many of the staff. Our goal was to find stand-alone subjects, enabling him to slot into lessons without feeling he’d missed vital teaching points. Only one afternoon provided this structure. We were aiming for at least two full days per week. His favourite subject, art, was not being offered in term one. So the two subjects he would partake in, were Creative Writing and Integrated Studies.

We’d found a new tutor for the start of 2009, teaching the LEM Phonics program. This was a very structured program to teach the 75 phonological sounds. For example, there are five sounds of ‘a’ and Harry had trouble interpreting these sounds. Using the new programme was slow going, but he was grasping it. Despite being bright, his brain simply couldn’t take in too much information at any one time.

Socialisation as a Part-timer

Before our part-time school experience, Harry had been in school for four years on a full-time basis. He was well liked and had plenty of friends. However, in Grade Two he became the target of an aggressive bully. We gave Harry coping strategies, as did the school. We wanted him to face this challenge and he did. But it came at a cost. He spent most of Grade Two hating school and feeling worthless because he thought he wasn’t as mentally strong as his peers.

Grade Three was a better year socially and Harry’s teacher really allowed him to do his own thing. So socialisation wasn’t the reason for our decision to go part-time. That had more to do with his lack of academic progress and being totally lost in the classroom. He was enduring such an awful situation on a daily basis that we just couldn’t leave him there.

Initially, we thought being at school part-time for Grade Four was important to enable Harry to socialise with his peers. He had many friends, both boys and girls. Despite his friends being keen to see him, he often preferred to wander around alone, daydreaming. Sports like football and cricket were too fast-paced for him. We prompted him to interact with others, which he did, in various ball games and make-believe play. We have always encouraged the creativity of his vivid imagination. (He can dream up entire stories and act them out).

Academic Progress as a Part-timer

For One Half Day Per Week

Although Harry liked his teacher, she was very demanding of him without providing guidance. She was defensive to any practical suggestions on our part about things which could help him comprehend in class.

It became apparent that attending school on such an irregular basis wasn’t meeting any of Harry’s needs. He became anxious the day before attending school and remained so until the moment I dropped him off. He pleaded with me to take him home. I thought I was doing the right thing by having him participate in such a structured educational setting.

His class teacher notified me of a timetable change. We had difficulty trying to slot him in somewhere that wouldn’t interfere with his tutoring program. Also, finding stand-alone subjects again became a challenge. His class teacher diplomatically highlighted that he took too long to settle into his work. His mind often wandered. He needed constant instructional guidance. Despite adoring Harry, she knew she didn’t have the strategies to teach him, nor the time available.

From Part-time School to Full-time Home

Our decision became easy. We decided to withdraw Harry from the school system completely and home-school him.
He was being home-schooled four days already and I’d become somewhat acclimatised to the process by then. I’d spent a lot of my energy worrying about Harry’s educational and emotional wellbeing prior to that moment.

**Reflections on Being Part-timers**

My memory of term one, 2009, is of an intensely stressful time. I tried to emulate the school system. I was exhausted from the extensive reading on home-schooling, dyslexia and teaching methods. Something had to give.

Opting out of the school system altogether, gave me a sense of relief. I could calm down and allow our son to learn at his own pace. We both benefited from this.

The other element of him being a part-timer was surprising to me. Other parents at the school, whom I knew quite well, felt compelled to question me in depth about our new choices. Some staff felt the need to question me as well. My standard response was that Harry learned best one-on-one. Looking back, I can’t blame them for being curious. At the time, I felt the questioning was an invasion of my privacy. It did subside after a month.

**What Does the Future Hold?**

It has been a massive learning curve from mid 2008 to now. I’m glad we first chose to remain in the school system. That proved that our choice to home-educate our son was right for us. We have a daughter (aged 7) and she attends a government primary school and is very happy there.

Home-education has opened my mind to limitless possibilities. Harry is constantly teaching me about his learning style and what he wants to learn about. We meet new people all the time. This lifestyle suits us beautifully.

Home is confident, creative, happy and thriving as a person. We attribute his maturity and our success (or brave choice as people kept telling us) to home-educating him full-time. From a student who struggled with writing, he now makes his own newspapers (to sell to family) and comics with an original superhero. His maths has improved out of sight. He now understands that when you put a lot of effort into something, the rewards will be great. He has discovered the love of learning.

I’d advise families interested in home education to speak to other families, do your research and follow your own instincts. Above all, our job as parents is to provide the best education and life experiences we can for our gorgeous children. I’d say whatever combination of schooling works best for you and your offspring is the path you should take. Keep asking questions and the answers will find you.

*Sue Minto is a second year of home education mum to 10 year-old son, Harry (and loving it!)*

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**Home Ed Winter Read-a-thon 2010**

Winter is always the perfect time to curl up with a good book and, here again, is the perfect excuse to do just that this winter.

In 2010 we’re once again inviting home educated people of all ages to participate in the Home Ed. Winter Read-a-Thon. Not only will it give you the perfect excuse to read lots of great books this winter, but you will also be helping to raise funds for the aid agency TEAR Australia (for information about TEAR + rhymes with “near” – visit www.tear.org.au or phone 1800 244 986).

If you’re home educated and would like to be part of the read-a-thon, all you have to do is complete a registration form and send it to us at the address on the form. Registration forms can be downloaded from HEN’s web page at www.home-ed.vic.edu.au. Alternatively, contact us by email at vampir12@bigpond.net.au, or by phone on 9557 8262, and we’ll send you one. Once we’ve received your completed registration form, we’ll send you everything you need to get started.

About the read-a-thon…

- It will run from June 1 to August 31 – you can read for all or part of this time.
- All the money you raise will go directly to TEAR Australia.
- You can include books of any length or genre. Picture books, chapter books, non-fiction, comics and audio books are all eligible to be included. You can also include books which have been read to you.
- You can participate with as little as one sponsor – every dollar raised counts.
- TEAR Australia will issue receipts to all sponsors who request them.
- Every participant will receive a certificate from TEAR Australia. The participant who raises the most money will receive a $40.00 gift card from book sellers, Angus & Robertson.

We hope you will be a part of the Home Ed. Winter Read-a-Thon 2010.

— The Ephraums Family – Grace, Judy & Brian
A Melbourne home educating family

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To join HEN and receive *Otherways* regularly, just visit the membership page of our website or contact Sue for a membership form at robwright@optusnet.com.au or by phone on (03) 5439 5134