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Long-distance learning

Satellite broadcast programs rapidly gaining popularity with home-schooling families

By **Heather Gillers**
STAFF WRITER

Matthew Daly seems to like his fifth-grade English teacher, although he's never met her.

His mother, Amy Daly, calls Mrs. Walker "personable," but they've never had a parent-teacher conference.

Matthew, who is home-schooled, studies math, science, history and English through a distance-learning program based at Bob Jones University.

For three hours a day, the Millington boy watches middle-school classes on DVDs rented from the Greenville, S.C.-based Bob Jones University Press.

Daly uses an answer book to grade Matthew's work. Teachers are accessible by e-mail. They answer students' and parents' questions and occasionally wish "happy birthday" to remote pupils at the beginning of each video-taped class.

"The parent is more like a principal, making sure the kids doing the work, helping if they get stuck," explained Amy Daly. "You work as a team."

Daly, an evangelical Christian, chose to home-school Matthew and his brother Michael to ensure they had a religious education.

She is not alone. Every year more American parents make the choice to teach their children at home, data from both the US Education Department and home-schooling advocacy groups suggest. Their families are geographically diverse but united in their search for a faith-based curriculum. For some of them, Christian distance-learning courses like the Bob Jones program have turned home-schooling from a daunting possibility to a manageable task.

"It's not as if the work's done for (the parent) in the sense that you still have to teach



DONNELL COLLINS / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Matthew Daly sits in his room while getting his school lessons from recorded DVDs offered through South Carolina-based Bob Jones University.



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Matthew Daly works on a rocket he made as part of his home-school curriculum. Matthew studies in a program offered through Bob Jones University.

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that course," said The Virginia-based Home Schooling Legal Defense Association spokesman Ian Slatter. "But it definitely makes things a lot easier."

During a recent Tuesday English class, Matthew Daly curled up on his bedroom floor in front of the television with his assigned reading. Walker discussed the story on screen, referring, as usual, to an abundance of visual aids. Tuesday's story focused on a 19th Century farm family, so as Walker spoke, the screen flashed to video of a woman, dressed in colonial garb, spinning cotton.

"If I was teaching this," Amy said, gesturing at the demonstration. "I would be trying to tell him about that."

How do we get into the home school market?

Bob Jones distance-learning high school and middle school programs, along with comparable ones at Pensacola, Fla.-based A Beka Academy, are thriving as more Americans opt for Christian home-schooling.

It's hard to keep track of home-schoolers, because many states, including Illinois, do not register students taught at home or in any way supervise them.

But of the 1.1 million home-schooled students the U.S. Education Department counted in 2003, a full third gave religious or moral reasons for their choice. The Home Schooling Legal Defense Association (HSDLA) estimates that far more — 70 percent — are evangelical Christians like Amy Daly. Both groups agree that home-schooling is growing at a rate of 7 to 15 percent per year.

The market for Bob Jones programs is growing at least as rapidly. Home-schooling curriculum aides were virtually nonexistent 10 years ago, when Bob Jones first video-broadcast high school courses, according to Slatter, the HSDLA spokesman.

Three years later, in 1998, Bob Jones introduced a video-taped middle school curriculum — the program in which Matthew Daly is enrolled. Since then, the number of home-schooled students has jumped 29 percent and home-schooling curriculum materials are now a \$750 million dollar industry.

"In the last year I've had several calls from big companies who are asking me 'how do we get into the home-school market?'" Slatter said.

While Amy Daly buys Matthew's English classes on DVD, Newark resident Pat Bowman's daughters watch Bob Jones high school classes broadcast in real time via a satellite in the Bowman's basement.

"They know what time their class comes on and they go down and turn it on," she said.

The satellite program also serves some Christian schools, where students can converse with their remote teacher via a special audio device. Home-schooled families can't afford the technology, but they can benefit from the class discussion.

Often, Bowman said, her daughters need not e-mail in their questions because faraway Christian school students ask them in class.

Bob Jones satellite broadcasts not only provide parents a coveted Christian curriculum, they also offer tips on the daunting task of being a child's teacher, principal and academic advisor, all rolled into one.

Panels of high school teachers offer advice on grading papers or dealing with an unmotivated student — "anything a teacher might have to deal with in the

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classroom," said Bowman, who appreciates the tips.

Proponents of Bob Jones courses say they are no less rigorous than public schools. The Illinois State Board of Education does not evaluate home-school curriculum materials. But Amy Daly's older son, Michael, was able to transition smoothly from taking Bob Jones video-classes at home to making almost all A's at Sandwich High School.

Can I borrow a tape?

High schools and colleges throughout Illinois can expect to see more and more Bob Jones graduates in the coming years, as increasing numbers of parents opt to give their kids a Christian education at home.

The HSDLA expects the \$750 home-schooling curriculum aide industry to hit \$1 billion in the next few years. Bob Jones University predicts the number of students using video curriculum materials will double by 2010. Bowman and Amy Daly get questions from a slew of curious parents with young home-schooled and preschool-age children. They see in the Bob Jones video curriculum a feasible way to continue teaching their children at home through middle and high school.

"How do you like it?," they want to know. "What do you think?" "Can I borrow a tape?"

Bowman and Daly are happy to oblige. After all, it was from another home-schooling mom that Daly herself first learned about the Bob Jones program.

She was teaching elementary school to Michael at home after the Christian school he had attended closed.

"It's very easy to teach a first grader," Daly recalled. But by second grade she was looking for a way to "enhance" Michael's classes. Bob Jones tapes — and later DVD's — seemed to do the job.

"It just made me feel that I was giving my child more," Daly said.

She offered an analogy to the regular coaching Matthew, a promising young athlete, enjoys.

"It's not like he can't play baseball without going to those lessons." With the added help, she said, "he's just more equipped."

12/02/05

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