

CALGARY HERALD

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CONTEXT: PAGE B1

Rising from the ashes

Five years after hurricane Katrina levelled New Orleans, the city is stubbornly defying predictions of its demise — even as its recovery remains uneven.

**MIX:** PAGE D2

I say tomato

A hot, new Calgary restaurant reminds us why it's worth agonizing over our garden tomatoes every growing season.

**MONEY:** PAGE F1

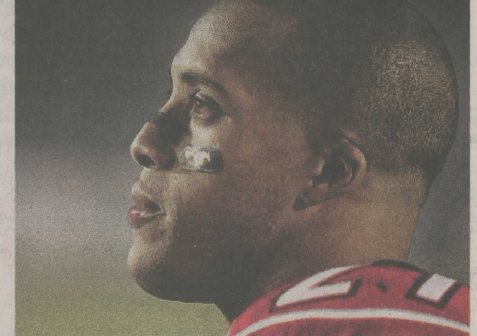
Finance 101

Post-secondary students need to pay attention so they can avoid the financial pitfalls that will haunt them beyond their school days.

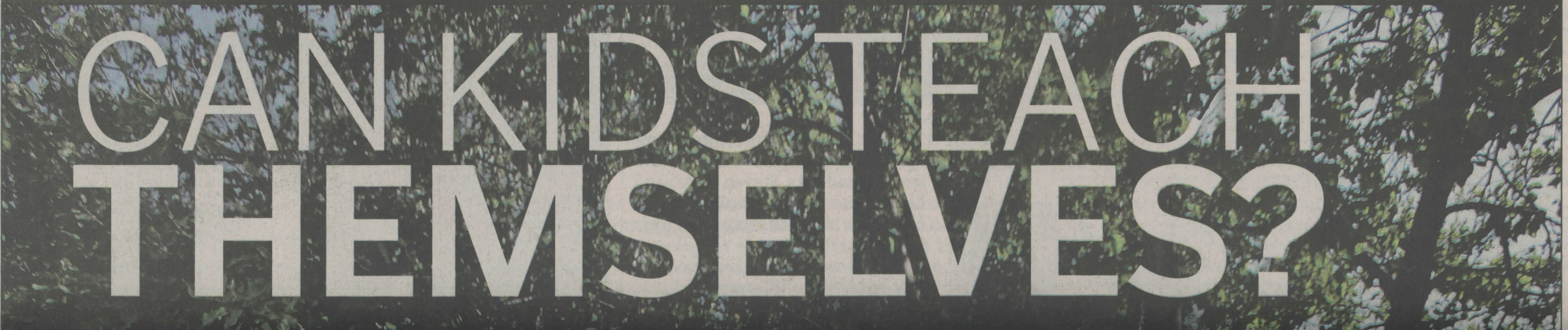
**SPORTS:** PAGE E1

Third and one

There may be a bobblehead in Stampeder running back Joffrey Reynolds's future if he breaks the franchise record for rushing.

**BACK TO CLASS:** Part 2 of a special Herald series

CAN KIDS TEACH THEMSELVES?



PARENTS HELP THEMSELVES!

AN IDEA TO LET CHILDREN GUIDE THEIR OWN LEARNING IS CATCHING ON, BUT DOES IT KEEP CHILDREN INTERESTED OR SHORTCHANGE THEIR EDUCATION?

SEE STORY, PAGES B4-B5

ALSO: DEBATE STILL RAGING AS PARENTAL RIGHTS BILL KICKS IN.

SEE STORY, PAGE A4



Cindy Bablitz educates her youngest son Elijah, 5, seen here, by letting him direct his own learning. She imparts lessons by following his interests.

Courtesy, Cindy Bablitz

From right, Travis, 12, and Scott Arnall, 8, work at their home in Calgary, where they are home- to get what they need to know, for now and in the future," says Judy. Her two oldest children re

'Unschoolled' kids call shots

HOME-SCHOOLING PARENTS ARE TURNING TO AN UNORTHODOX FORM OF EDUCATION IN WHICH CHILDREN DIRECT WHAT THEY LEARN. ADVOCATES SAY IT KEEPS THEM INTERESTED AND EXCITED ABOUT LEARNING, BUT CRITICS ARGUE IT'S SHORTCHANGING STUDENTS. **LISA KADANE, CALGARY HERALD**

Judy Arnall's Lake Bonavista home is every child's dream.

The basement is packed with enough bricks to stock the newly opened Lego store at Chinook Centre. A corner of the family room rivals Petland, with cages holding guinea pigs, gerbils, two finches and a budgie. Nine network computers are available in different rooms for kids to use for Internet research, writing or playing games. Posters explaining the atom, photosynthesis, world geography and history hang on walls in the upstairs hallways.

Arnall's five children, who range in age from eight to 19, are reading and playing video games on a recent summer afternoon. Home is where they sleep, eat, play and go to school. Or, rather, it's where they unschool.

Arnall is one of a small but growing segment of home-schooling parents who pass on the Alberta curriculum in favour of a course of study, chosen by her kids, that interests them. She lets them

decide what they want to learn, when. Her job is to act as a facilitator to help them get the information or supplies they need — from the library or a retail store — to enhance their learning about, say, Shakespeare, music or the Second World War.

"It's trusting kids to get what they need to know, for now and in the future," says Arnall.

Unschooling is a radical departure from traditional education, where children sit quietly in a classroom and listen to a teacher.

"People can't wrap their head around it. It's really outside of their reality of what school and education is

BACK TO CLASS



A CALGARY HERALD SPECIAL SERIES

supposed to be," says Arnall, a local parenting speaker and author of Discipline Without Distress.

Instead of learning from a textbook or teacher, unschooled children learn by

doing. They master fractions by baking and cooking; they learn to read by looking at books, playing computer games or being read to; they learn science by gardening, hiking or using a magnifying glass to start a fire (supervised, of course). And they learn by asking questions — not by answering them. If Arnall doesn't know the answer, she helps them find it.

Arnall's two oldest boys, who began unschooling in Grades 2 and 1 and are now ages 19 and 18, have just written and passed their Grade 12 diploma exams using this self-directed approach to learning.

Sitting at a table on her sunny back deck, Arnall holds up the completed tests, which scored a 76 per cent average across seven subjects, as proof that unschooling works.

Unschooling, also called child-led learning, is not a new concept. The term was coined by American John Holt, a teacher who campaigned for school re-

form in the 1960s and '70s. He believed children could learn without conventional schooling and wrote several books on the subject including *Instead of Education*, *Teach Your Own* and *Learning All the Time*. After his death in 1985 the movement continued to gain momentum.

In 1979 Statistics Canada reported just over 2,000 home-based learners in Canada. By 2003, when the Canadian Centre for Home Education published *Home Education in Canada: A Report on the Pan-Canadian Study on Home Education*, the number was estimated to be somewhere between 60,000 and 80,000. Alberta Education reported 7,968 students registered in the Home Education Program for 2010.

Although the number of unschoolers is not documented, parents of unschoolers estimate their number at about 10 per cent of home schoolers, which would translate to between 6,000 and 8,000 across the country,

and close to 800 in Alberta.

As their numbers have grown, so has the volume of books and resources on the subject. There's even an online unschooling magazine (lifelearningmagazine.com) and a Canadian Yahoo group with 500 members at unschooling_canada@yahoogroups.com.

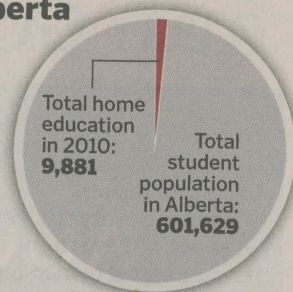
An unschooling mission statement might read something like this: "We want our children to own their learning and to learn for their own reasons, not to please a teacher," a passage excerpted from *The Unschooling Unmanual*.

Unschooling is governed by provincial governments through home-education regulations. In Alberta, families wishing to unschool must register their children as home schoolers. They will then meet a facilitator several times a year to discuss education plans or goals, touch base on how things are going mid-year, and gather again at year's end to review what was learned, usually by

Home schooling in Alberta

	Home education program	Home ed. blended program
2010	7,968	1,913
2009	8,097	2,015
2008	7,658	2,075
2007	7,291	2,678

Source: Alberta Education





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Stuart Graddon, Calgary Herald



Stuart Graddon, Calgary Herald

Heidi Arnall, 16, is among the nearly 8,000 Alberta students who are home schooled.

Danis, whether it happens in high school or later in university.

"I feel it's the future of education."

Even Alberta education minister Dave Hancock has said that "teachers must give up being the sage on the stage to become the guide on the side. From teaching to facilitating."

Still, it's one thing to allow flexibility within the parameters of a school and curriculum. It requires a philosophical shift — a rejection of traditional education — to switch to unschooling. This makes a lot of educators and parents uncomfortable, and leaves unschooling vulnerable to criticism.

There's a perception that child-led learning is the domain of permissive parents who let their children run wild without rules or consequences. An ABC News Nightline segment, *Extreme Parenting: Radical Unschooling*, portrayed parents of unschoolers as hapless pushovers who allow their kids to watch TV all day, eat whatever they want (pasta with peanut butter sauce, for one) and stay up until well past midnight.

Critics also charge parents are denying children the experience of school and the high-school diploma that

of education into a cohesive whole. As a former teacher and school principal, she argues children often need an educated educator to help link everything together so they are prepared to go out into the world.

What irritates Cindy Bablitz most about these criticisms is the argument that children must be made to sit through a unit on China in Grade 3 or a Canadian history class in Grade 5 — even if they have no interest in the country or content at that age — because that's life and sometimes you have to do things you don't like.

"I find that to be an incredibly sad approach to a life ... that we need to be forced to learn things that we're not interested in because that's life," says Bablitz, a freelance writer who unschools her three boys, ages five, seven and 11.

That's one reason she decided to unschool her children — she wants them to have a voice in what they learn and how they learn it. Another reason that dovetails with the first: she feels that institutionalized education pushes someone else's agenda on kids — "How do you decide what information is so important everyone has to know it?" Bablitz wonders. (To which Bell would respond: "There are some ba-



Stuart Gradon, Calgary Herald

hooled by their mother, Judy, who advocates an approach to learning that is led by the interests of each child. "It's trusting kids recently passed their diploma exams.

showing off a portfolio.

Since children do not follow the Alberta curriculum, parents look to a schedule of "learning outcomes" for guidance. Instead of reading, say, *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Great Gatsby* in Grade 12, for example, unschooleders must demonstrate they can "read for information, understanding and enjoyment." Rather than solving geometry proofs or calculus derivatives, they must know how to "use mathematics to solve problems in business, science and daily life situations."

In many ways, the learning outcomes reflect real life. Most people read for enjoyment, not to uncover the inner meaning of an Emily Dickinson poem. Likewise (unless they plan to study engineering), most people use math to budget or halve a recipe, not to figure out a train's velocity as it travels from Wichita to Omaha.

Unschoolers do not take tests or receive marks, but parents know they are learning through observation — the same way the mother of a toddler knows how many words her child can say.

There are about 125 students registered as home schoolers in Calgary, says Mary Ann Fullerton, home-schooling co-ordinator with the Calgary Board of Education.

Of those, "We have a

smaller percentage who say, 'I'm an unschooler,'" she says.

These families will map out rough education goals for the year, which are subject to change as the child's interests change, says Fullerton.

"The unschooler (parent) will say, 'That's where we're going,' but they'll follow their child's direction.

"It's a partnership. The child leads, the parent supports."

These kids are free to pursue an interest in dinosaurs all the way back to when the continents were connected in one great land mass called Pangea, or delve into genealogy and trace the family to a plot in Ireland (provided their parents are willing to fly them there). Instead of glossing over a subject (a frequent criticism of traditional education), it can be explored in much greater depth.

"Our (home-schooling) families are nothing but impressive. They are all so different," says Fullerton.

What kind of parent do you have to be to unschool your kids? Lisa Rouleau pauses before answering.

"You have to like spending time with your kids. I love spending time with my kids, love watching what they're learning, love talking to them," says Rouleau, mom to a 15-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son.

She began unschooling her daughter in kindergarten because her interests were so intense and focused.

"She wanted time to let things sink into her head."

Rouleau recalls a love of cheetahs that lasted months. During that time her daughter drew pictures of cheetahs, pretended to be a cheetah, read books on cheetahs and watched cheetah documentaries. In some ways it was like a unit study on the African cats, with the bonus that her daughter also learned about African countries, geography and ecology, and conservation efforts. Because the child led the cheetah-thon, she retained everything.

Rouleau knows her daughter is learning, but it wasn't easy to buck the norm.

"You go through regular periods of questioning — are you doing enough for them? Are they doing OK?" says Rouleau.

Part of the worry stems from the fact our culture doesn't give children much credit.

"We don't have a lot of faith in kids. We believe kids are going to slack off and do nothing if we give them that freedom," says Rouleau.

Judy Arnall's son Travis, now 12, didn't read until he was nine because he wasn't ready. He finally taught himself by going on Facebook, and playing computer games

that required reading and writing — not by studying the alphabet and memorizing the sounds of different letter combinations. It's an illustration that children will learn when they want to, in their own way.

"We all learn differently," says Daniel Danis.

"We all have our own personalized system... Research shows that if I choose to learn what I want when I'm ready, I'm going to learn more."

Even outside of unschooling, this is not a new concept. Danis is the principal at Bishop Carroll High School, where self-directed personalized learning — within the bounds of the Alberta curriculum — has been the norm for almost four decades. Students are free to pursue a high-school diploma at a pace that suits their needs and interests. They work with a teacher adviser to stay on track, but it's up to them to be self-motivated and learn time-management skills to complete high school. Some students finish in two years; others take four. The flexibility lets them focus on other interests, such as music or hockey, outside the classroom (Olympic hockey gold medalist Hayley Wickenheiser is a Bishop Carroll graduate).

"I believe every student will one day have to go through taking ownership for their learning," says

schooling, portrayed parents of unschoolers as hapless pushovers who allow their kids to watch TV all day, eat whatever they want (pasta with peanut butter sauce, for one) and stay up until well past midnight.

Critics also charge parents are denying children the experience of school and the high-school diploma that goes with it. (To pursue post-secondary education, unschooled children may write their diploma exams, enrol in Athabasca University and then transfer after a year of good marks, or take Grade 12 courses at age 20 to get retro-active credit and marks.)

Another worry is that unschooled children will be socially stunted if they're not interacting with peers on a regular basis — though most unschooled kids meet friends through sports and by socializing with other home-school families, says Arnall.

"What I like about this concept is you're grabbing on to children's interests, and that's a teachable moment," says Gail Bell, co-founder of Parenting Power, a local organization that offers family coaching and workshops.

"However, if the child is never introduced to poetry, how do you know if they're interested in it? There could potentially be a lot of things (unschooled) children are not exposed to... to completely follow the child's lead is unrealistic in the real world. In the real world, sometimes you have to complete a task you don't love."

Overcoming adversity or mastering challenging, unlikely concepts builds self-confidence and self-esteem, says Bell. She also wonders if unschooled kids would learn bits and pieces of knowledge, but perhaps never integrate the strands

to have a voice in what they learn and how they learn it. Another reason that dovetails with the first: she feels that institutionalized education pushes someone else's agenda on kids — "How do you decide what information is so important everyone has to know it?" Bablitz wonders. (To which Bell would respond: "There are some basics kids just need to learn." Math, for one.)

What's more, Bablitz has three active boys and calls sitting six hours at a desk a "biologically preposterous" proposition.

While she is an unflinching unschooling advocate, Bablitz realizes the philosophy is not for everyone.

"There is no one right way," she says, which is why we have public and Catholic schools, charter schools, Montessori and Waldorf schools, and home-schooling. What she wants is for people to know that unschooling exists; that it's a viable option for many families.

"I do want people to consider (it). I do want people to open their mind to another way."

For Bablitz, taking charge of her sons' education — by letting them own it — has been liberating. She calls it an honest experiment in pragmatic realism. Bablitz knows exactly what her sons are learning instead of having "blind faith" in the education system to teach them. Her boys are navigating the world by following their interests in an organic way.

"Allowing this kind of freedom... our children will find their path. There's just a greater degree of surprise for how they'll get there," Bablitz says.