

Opinion: We don't need no education

By Ben Hewitt, *Outside*

Rye Hewitt putting his pack basket, which he wove himself, to good use. He and his brother Fin learned how to make the wooden baskets from a friend of the family's who also unschools her children. Photo: Penny Hewitt

In early September, in a clapboard house situated on 43 acres just outside a small town in northern Vermont, two boys awaken. They are brothers; the older is 12, the younger 9, and they rise to a day that has barely emerged from the clutches of dark. It is not yet autumn, but already the air has begun to change, the soft nights of late summer lengthening and chilling into the season to come. Outside the boys' bedroom window, the leaves on the maples are just starting to turn.

School is back in session and has been for two weeks or more, but the boys are unhurried. They dress slowly, quietly. Faded and frayed thrift-store camo pants. Flannel shirts. Rubber barn boots. Around their waists, leather belts with knife sheaths. In each sheath, a fixed-blade knife.

By 6:30, with the first rays of sun burning through the ground-level fog, the boys are outside. At some point in the next hour, a yellow school bus will rumble past the end of the driveway that connects the farm to the town road. The bus will be full of children the boys' age, their foreheads pressed against the glass, gazing at the unfurling landscape, the fields and hills and forests of the small working-class community they call home.

The boys will pay the bus no heed.

Maybe the boys are actually my sons, and maybe their names are

Fin and Rye, and maybe, if my wife, Penny, and I get our way, they will never go to school.

Hey, a father can dream, can't he?

There's a name for the kind of education Fin and Rye are getting. It's called unschooling, though Penny and I have never been fond of the term. But "self-directed, adult-facilitated life learning in the context of their own unique interests" doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, so unschooling it is.

It is already obvious that unschooling is radically different from institutionalized classroom learning, but how does it differ from more common homeschooling? Perhaps the best way to explain it is that all unschooling is homeschooling, but not all homeschooling is unschooling. While most homeschooled children follow a structured curriculum, unschoolers like Fin and Rye have almost total autonomy over their days. At ages that would likely see them in seventh and fourth grades, I generously estimate that my boys spend no more than two hours per month sitting and studying the subjects, such as science and math, that are universal to mainstream education. Not two hours per day or even per week. Two hours per month. Comparatively speaking, by now Fin would have spent approximately 5,600 hours in the classroom. Rye, nearly three years younger, would have clocked about half that time.

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