A School of Their Own

How one alum’s new learning center in North Carolina could redefine homeschooling

Story by Barry Yeoman   Photographs by Jillian Clarke

Opposite and above: Current students from Dimensions Family School
of the conventional educational structure. teaching to children and parents who have opted out peer support, social opportunities, and high-quality founded dfs last year with the intention of providing a small lesson on living with compassion.

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with flushed cheeks and fine blond hair, has brought a box of vegan cookies to share. “Do you remember why we bring cookies?” Dungan asks the students.

“It makes the space a little more comfortable, I guess,” says Luci, a blue-eyed 12-year-old wearing a camo hoodie. “Normally, we wouldn’t be able to eat food during class.”

“People want to come when there’s food, right?” Dungan says. “It’s welcoming. And when everyone eats the same thing, we’re thinking about others. needs. When you think about your snacks, make sure that our vegan has something to eat. Or if someone has a food allergy — we have a student who is allergic to walnuts — you can be thinking mind-

If this lesson sounds rudimentary, it’s because Dungan knows that these students have had fewer opportunities than many of their peers to share snacks in a classroom. They are homeschooled students who attend classes and clubs at a nonprofit learning center called Dimensions Family School (DFS). Dungan founded DFS last year with the intention of providing peer support, social opportunities, and high-quality teaching to children and parents who have opted out of the conventional educational structure.

It’s a sophisticated advance on an old idea. For the roughly 2 million homeschooled children in the United States, learning doesn’t necessarily entail sitting at a kitchen table all day with a parent and siblings. “Homeschoolers rely extensively on net-

works of the like-minded,” writes Robert Kunzman, a professor of education at Indiana University and managing director of the International Center for Home Education Research. Those networks range from informal playground groups to co-ops in which parents share the teaching or occasionally hire outsiders. Some public schools also offer part-time programs for homeschoolers.

Dungan’s DFS goes beyond the informal, the like-minded, or the part-time. It provides a 10-room space that’s open every weekday from 9 a.m. till 4 p.m. It draws a heterogeneous membership of 50 families from a wide geographic area. Its instructors, some hired and others parent-volunteers, hold graduate degrees. It offers outward-looking community activities like service projects and a craft market. Dungan recently launched a parent-education curriculum and has hired a researcher to gather periodic data to assess the efficacy of the model.

“A co-op on steroids,” she says.

The curriculum, which runs from prekindergarten through high school, includes classes in traditional subjects like chemistry and music theory. Dimensions also offers instruction in less academic skills: community service, self-governance, and, during another Big Picture Ideas class, emotional self-regulation.

Dungan writes the word “hijacking” on the whiteboard, asks for a definition, and then flips the conversation from cockpits to adolescent brains. “Emotional hijacking is when your body takes over or it steals control of your emotion,” she explains. “You are so mad that your brain literally stops thinking — the higher part of your brain — and [you] just punch somebody. Or your sadness takes over and you can’t get that thing done that you know you have to do. You are no longer going in the way that you would normally, rationally want to go.”

One student protests. “If you’re like that all the time,” she says, explaining, “that is the way you would normally go.”

“Not in the long term, when you’re 40,” Dungan says. “It’s not where you need to be, in order to be healthy or successful or happy.” Adolescents, she explains, lack the brain structure they need to modulate their emotions. “But there are things you can learn,” she adds. Dungan introduces an exercise that she acknowledges will be “really hard”: sitting quietly for four minutes of intentional breathing and guided body-awareness meditation.

“Are you trying to torture us?” Luci says, laughing but serious. This is a class that is prone to wig-

gling and crosstalk, tomfoolery and the occasion dramatic exit. Four minutes of stillness would be unprecedented. “I want you to do this,” says Dun-

gan, “because the skills that you learn can be applied way outside of a classroom. It will help you in your relationships. It will help you in your schoolwork. It will help you with your parents.”
A few students duck out. Most stay and eventually quiet down. “Try to relax your hands and feet,” Dungan says. “Settle your body. And know that there’s a place of peace inside of you that you can go to just by breathing and paying attention.”

Dungan was an accidental homeschooling parent herself. Raised in poverty, without a strong parent-advocate, she suffered what she calls a “spotty” gifted education in the Michigan public schools. “In fourth grade, I took fifth-grade math,” she says. “The next year I didn’t have math at all; they had me be a reading tutor. And that was my experience of what it meant to be gifted: We’ll accelerate you, make you do extra work, then we’ll pull all your services. And we’ll keep doing that year after year.”

That said, the public schools also served as an important safety-net function for Dungan. “School was a place where I could eat,” she says.

Dungan graduated high school, attended classes at a community college, then became a computer programmer for 10 years. In 2006, after her second child was born, she enrolled in Ohio’s Antioch University to become an educator. While earning her bachelor’s degree, she worked at the Antioch School, a century-old private alternative school where students help design the rules and curriculum.

Then Dungan’s husband got a job offer in North Carolina. The couple moved in 2008 with a first-grader and a 4-year-old, plus a third child on the way. Arriving too late in the summer to find a compatible school, the couple decided to keep their kids home for a year.

“Homeschooling was lovely,” Dungan says — so lovely, in fact, that one year turned into nine (with periodic forays into the public schools). Her children — she now has four — “were all able to learn at their own pace. We were following their interests and going deep into subjects.” The highly educated Durham-Chapel Hill area had a large, vibrant homeschool community that offered myriad enrichment opportunities. “But we were also driving around a lot,” she says, “and spending a lot of money.” Dungan would drop off her eldest daughter at Spanish class, her son at nature school, and her second daughter at swimming practice, all the while shuttling her baby from errand to errand. “The essence of what I wanted to do as a homeschool was about relationships and about deep learning,” she says. It wasn’t supposed to be about chauffeuring.

Researchers say homeschooling can stress parents as much as it rewards them. Some of the burden comes from never having enough personal time, some from playing a dual role in a child’s life. “There’s a lot of additional emotional baggage that comes with making your own child learn the times table,” says Jennifer Lois, a sociologist at Western Washington University. Lois has interviewed numerous homeschooling mothers, one of whom described how her son felt “completely safe breaking down emotionally” over an academic assignment — something he’d never do in school.

Lois concludes that homeschooling parents suffer burnout much like that of professional educators. Those stresses are minimized when families form supportive communities.

Creating communities was on Dungan’s mind, too, when she entered the Learning and Teaching Program at the Ed School in 2015. By then, she had taught gifted children on the autism spectrum, founded a summer tinkering program, and ran off-site camps for a science museum. Now she wanted to build a more ambitious organization: a centralized location to house a wide-ranging educational program for homeschoolers.

As she envisioned Dimensions, not only would it relieve parents of time pressure; it would also provide children with some of the social benefits of attending school.

“They want a locker. They want a mascot. They want the feeling of belonging,” she says of the kids. Unlike conventional schools, DFS could offer “those trappings with the individuality of their own program, their own philosophy, their own pace.”
At the Ed School, Dungan did much of the planning for Dimensions’ launch, while deepening her grounding in educational theory and strengthening her leadership, financial management, and research skills. She also learned how to foster diversity and how to scale an institution beyond a single location. “She had a core commitment to learner agency,” recalls Associate Professor Karen Brennan, “to provide the structure and supports for them to design their own learning.”

With a master’s degree in hand, Dungan returned to North Carolina, where the homeschooling rate is almost twice the national average. Then she began to race the clock.

DIMENSIONS OPENED THREE MONTHS LATER, IN September 2016, on a commercial strip that once served millworkers and now caters to college students and professionals. From the sidewalk, a wooden stairway leads up to a reception area that branches into three activity nodes. The front section houses the teen lounge, an often-rambunctious space governed by the older students with occasional adult intervention; it has foosball and pool tables along with comfy sofas and chairs. Off the lounge are three classrooms where, during a recent visit, two high-schoolers analyzed different translations of a Taoist text and some middle-schoolers created digital storyboards.

Two rooms near the middle of the building are used primarily by elementary school children. One, called the Creative Cave, has shelves stacked with wire and beads, and supplies for sewing and scrapbooking. Last fall, with the faint edge of Hurricane Matthew approaching Durham, Dungan used the Cave to teach seven children about extreme weather. The lesson covered geography, history, and science and ended with the creation of a miniature hurricane in a stainless-steel bowl.

Further back, the kindergarten and pre-K students huddle around a table making arts-and-crafts sheep from construction paper and felt. As the glue dries, their teacher gathers them into a nest of pillows and rugs for story time.

The reasons these children are being homeschooled vary widely. DFS registrar Mistie Gotch, whose son brought the vegan cookies, worried that conventional schools have a “homogenizing” effect that “doesn’t always allow for the individual student to have a fulfilling sense of purpose.” Gotch wants...
her sons to understand issues like wealth inequality, which she feels most schools gloss over, and to develop a strong sense of environmental stewardship.

Brock Sayre, who teaches DFS’s Dungeons & Dragons class, started homeschooling his son, now 14, about five years ago — it was supposed to be a short-term fix — when he decided the boy was being ill-served by his charter school. “The stuff he was really good in: They were like, ‘Oh, great, he just won’t learn any math for three more years,’” Sayre says. Meanwhile, his son was struggling with writing. “So he would hide under his desk and cry until writing time was over. Then he didn’t have to write.”

Missing from the mix are families who homeschool for primarily religious reasons, even though they represent the majority of homeschoolers nationwide. Those families tend to follow more standardized curricula. Dungan notes that Dimensions’ membership includes people of faith, even if they use secular teaching methods.

Despite their dissatisfaction with conventional schools, Dimensions parents say they don’t want to isolate their children at home.

Before Niambi Jaha-Echols, artist and consultant, moved east from Chicago in 2014, her now-13-year-old son Jelani was struggling at a private school that, in her view, set a lower expectation for him as an African American male. Jaha-Echols also found the curriculum relentlessly Eurocentric. Jelani, who is serious and sensitive, felt alone. “I wanted to fit in,” he says. “It felt like no one wanted me to be a part of the activities after class. That weighed on me because then I started thinking I wasn’t good enough.”

When they landed in the North Carolina countryside, 35 minutes from Durham, Jaha-Echols and her husband, an engineer, decided to create a new model: a little bit of home teaching supplemented heavily by “a la carte classes” in the community. “We knew that socialization was a high priority for him,” she says of Jelani. “We were able to outsource almost 90 percent of his classes. The only problem for me — because I’m not a homeschool teacher; I don’t feel like I could do that — was having to take him from place to place to place. I became the unpaid Uber mom.”

Dimensions relieved the transportation strain while also providing Jelani with the friendships he craved. “What I love about DFS is that it’s in one space,” his mother says. “He’s getting all the social components that typically happen in school.” Jelani recognizes that he and his classmates are not being shoehorned into a common set of expectations. “They are able to work with anyone,” he says. “If you have a reading disorder, or something like that, there is no pressure to get it right the first time.”

**IN THE FIRST MONTHS AFTER DIMENSIONS’ opening, students and parents talk about the school in the language of homecoming. “Last Sunday, I wanted to go to sleep as fast as I could because I needed to get here,” says 13-year-old Beckett, who attends three days a week. He glances around the teen lounge, where his friends are waiting for him to join them for lunch on the street below. “It’s definitely nice to be a community,” he says.

Dungan, in November, says she is generally satisfied with the launch, based on the feedback she’s getting. “There are parents that are really happy that their kids have finally found a fit,” she says. During at least one conversation a week, she has watched a parent shed tears of relief.

That said, “it would be unhealthy for us to think we had it right from the get-go. I think of us as a learning organization. You just have to open, and be bad at stuff for a bit, and get better.” She has identified some shortcomings, which she plans to rectify when Dimensions’ third quarter begins in January. “Which makes me frustrated because I feel like we could do things better right now.” The schedule for each quarter, she notes, is set months in advance.

One of those shortcomings is the elementary school curriculum: a hodgepodge of one-hour classes without a common thread. “People aren’t necessarily willing to drive over for a single hour,” Dungan says. “What we hear now is, ‘Well, my kid really wants to do that engineering class and that math class. But the Shakespeare class, not so much.”

Dungan’s solution is to create “unit studies”: three-hour interdisciplinary blocks centered on topics like inventors, animals, and the solar system. Within the solar-system unit, for example, “they would do math, and they would read a biography, and they would create a science project,” she says. “But it would all be integrated in a theme that they were interested in.”

Meanwhile, some of the older students have expressed to Dungan that sitting in a classroom all day isn’t their favorite way to learn. She’s planning
to remedy this with project-based learning, starting on a pilot scale. “We’re going to see if, for kids who do not love the traditional system — whether or not they’re good at it — can we create projects for them that are meaningful, that cover the subject areas.”

Some issues remain unresolved in these initial months, such as pricing. When Dimensions opened, full memberships — which cost $300 per family plus $50 per child per month — also required parents to work a certain number of hours. “My original vision was that everyone would share a little bit of their time and talent,” Dungan says in November. “In some cases that’s happening beyond my wildest dreams” although she worries that the most enthusiastic volunteers might burn out. Other parents aren’t stepping up at all, often for legitimate reasons like family illness.

Dungan suspects that some families have not applied to DFS because of the work mandate. She wonders if there should be a higher-cost membership that exempts parents from labor. “Which brings me questions about our mission,” she says. “Do we want to offer a service, or do we want to build a community? Those are the things that keep me up at night.”

ON A JANUARY AFTERNOON, AT THE EDGE OF A RIVER outside Durham, six students gather around a buzzcut man for a hands-on lesson in stream restoration. “This is Chasmanthium latifolium,” says Keith Nealson, superintendent of Eno River State Park, as he fingers the delicate seeds of a native oat grass growing along the bank. He explains that when erosion threatens to swallow up a hiking trail, workers cut a new trail further from the water. They then close the old trail by scattering wild grass seeds, which the students will collect today.

“These are river oats,” Nealson says. “They grow close by the river. Don’t fall in. That is a big rule.”

The students, both elementary and middle school, set out to collect seed in plastic cups. Supervising them is Dimensions’ newest teacher (and Dungan’s Ed School classmate), Stuart Jeckel, Ed.M.’16, who taught at Khan Academy and did quantitative social science research at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. The weekly Outdoors at the Eno class is one of DFS’s early forays into project-based learning, and Jeckel integrates multiple disciplines into today’s field trip. He turns the discovery of a spring into a lesson on groundwater versus surface water. He locates an exotic grass and points out the dense rhizomes that enable the plant to spread: an organic lesson about invasive species. Later, Luci, along with Dungan’s 12-year-old daughter Kristin, leads the younger children in a writing and drawing exercise inspired by their riparian surrounds.

It’s now the third quarter, and Dungan is rolling out her improvement plans. The elementary kids are immersed in “unit studies”: On a Tuesday morning, the three-hour Medieval Times class includes a computer activity in which they dress knights and design posters for lost dragons. Later this morning they will work in groups to build castles with clay. Teacher Leigh Ann VanSchaick, a former public school teacher, has also woven math into the unit (calculating castle perimeters, for example), along with historic concepts like the feudal system. To help students imagine life before electricity, VanSchaick convened a “Round Table” meeting at which the children tried to read by candlelight.

Dungan has also resolved the volunteering quandary: Dimensions now offers higher-priced memberships that don’t include a work requirement. “We clarified that so we can charge people transparently when they decide not to volunteer,” she explains. “Currently no one is using it — and we have a lot of people stepping up to collect their hours.”

There is more in the works. In March, DFS held an open house at its future second location, 40 miles south: a farm in rural Moncure, where Dungan hopes the children will learn ecosystem monitoring, animal husbandry, and astronomy hands on. She envisions the children growing their own food and eating it for lunch. She also plans to provide transportation between Moncure and Durham, so students can take classes at both sites.

“I think this may be the wave of the future,” says Peter Gray, a research professor of psychology at Boston College who studies homeschooling models that encourage children to follow their own interests. “In my view, the biggest part of education, whether you’re in school or not, is what you learn in interactions with other children.” For her part, Dungan is less attached, over the long term, to running Dimensions than she is to propagating more alternatives for homeschooling families. “I see the family-school model as a movement,” she says. If that pans out, she wants to help cut as many trails as possible.

BARRY YEOMAN IS A WRITER BASED IN DURHAM WHOSE WORK HAS APPEARED IN THE AMERICAN PROSPECT, POPULAR SCIENCE, THE NATION, AND THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.