

Parent Power!

Helping you make sense of schooling today

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The New Face of Home-Schooling



Is home-schooling for you? For some parents, the thought of having to teach their kids (when homework wars are already enough!) evokes terror. Among others, though, the idea of home-schooling as a viable, educational alternative to the traditional classroom is catching on.

Last year, nearly two million students — roughly three percent of the school-age population in the United States — were educated by parents at home. In the early 1980s only 15,000 families participated.

The population of children now taught at home is expanding by seven to 18 percent a year, according to the National Home Education Research Institute (NHRI).

The prolific growth of home-schooling as an alternative to conventional classroom education reflects an expanding diversity among parents choosing this method.

"Today's home-schoolers run the gamut of education, economic, religious, ethnic and geographic variations," said Linda Dobson of the Long Beach, California-based National Home Education Network, a support group for families that are interested in home-schooling.

In the Washington, DC area, that diversity is showing in the middle-class African American suburb of Prince George's County, Maryland, where hundreds of these

parents are opting to educate their children at home.

The reasons parents choose to home-school their children vary widely. Some school-at-home parents have joined this alternative educational venue because their local schools fail to challenge their children. Other parents decide for moral or religious reasons. Parents have turned to home-schooling due to safety concerns.

Joby Dupree told *The Washington Post* that she joined the home-school movement because of the unchallenging curriculum at her local school and a lack of emphasis on black achievements and contributions.

"I've introduced them to the empires of Mali, Ghana and Songhai," she said. "And I've taught them about African American scientists and inventors like Lewis Latimer, who worked with Thomas Edison and invented the first light bulb..."

Such focus on deeper academic and cultural pursuits is what tends to unite home-schoolers of different viewpoints. Homeschoolers tend to teach their children at higher levels, expect more and delve more deeply into issues concerning our country's history and its people. There are also companies with academic programs that meet the rigorous demands of homeschooling parents. One such program is the Calvert Curriculum, 20,000 of whose high-achieving

courses are being used by homeschooling families here and abroad. Homeschoolers dominate educational websites, too, where they can share lesson plans, approaches to teaching and learning and a plethora of educational information with one another.

Children schooled at-home averaged 1100 on the SAT this year, 81 points higher than the national mean. For two years running, the National Spelling Bee has seen home-schoolers win the challenging contest. High schools and colleges accept home-schooled children like any other student, as long as there are records and transcripts in order.

IS THIS FOR YOU?

It takes an enormous time commitment to be a successful homeschooler. If you're considering this route, it's best to have at least one parent at home as the hands-on instructor for your children. Working parents without help may find it difficult to devote the time needed to give proper instruction to their children. And some parents who have tried home-schooling have found that conventional education is better suited for their sons and daughters. Whatever your preference, home-schooling is emerging as one of many choices that is available to families as it becomes increasingly clear that the one-size-fits-all traditional approach to schooling is not adequate for many children.



Accreditation: What does it mean?

Your child's school has just been accredited and the staff is basking in the glow. Is the feeling of accomplishment well deserved? Has the school passed some objective measure of excellence? Conversely, if your school is not accredited, does it mean that it's a bad school?

Contrary to common lore, accreditation is not synonymous with educational excellence. It has more to do with a school's administrative processes and deployment of resources than with educational outcomes for students. High schools at which more than 90 percent of the students test at barely functional in reading, writing, and mathematics manage to stay accredited.

Most local educators view accreditation by one of the nation's six regional accrediting bodies as a status symbol. Certainly most of the public high schools in the country are more than willing to fork over the money for membership in their regional accrediting body and submit to the lengthy and costly evaluation required for accreditation.

About 19,000 - or 95 percent - of the nation's public high schools, and one-sixth of the elementary and middle schools, are accredited by the regional associations such as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges or the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. Private and religious schools also often seek accreditation from a regional body as a means of obtaining licensure from states.

With so many schools accredited, clearly the pressure is on all schools to fall in line. Fear plays some role in their decision. One of the arguments the accrediting agencies make for their stamp of approval is that without it, schools jeopardize their graduates' college prospects. Or do they?

A high school's accreditation "or lack of it" is a "non-issue" when it comes to evaluating student applicants at Middlebury College, a highly selective school in Vermont, according to a university spokesman. Schools that haven't belonged to a regional accrediting association for decades continue to see top graduates accepted at such esteemed institutions as the University of Pennsylvania, the College of William and Mary College and Duke University.

Over the years, as the accrediting associations have expanded their reach, they have focused less on the quality of teaching and learning, and more on facilities, equipment and policies of the schools seeking accreditation. A visiting team of inspectors is more likely to comment on the condition of fire extinguishers or how cleaning supplies are stored than on whether a school has a coherent math curriculum.

As a result, the influence of accrediting associations among national education reformers and state policymakers has waned, especially after the states began to establish more rigorous standards and assessments and, more recently, to do their own school evaluations, issuing school report cards based in large part upon how students performed on statewide tests.

Typically, the accreditation process for a school begins with an exhaustive self-study by numerous committees drawn from school staff with some parental input. It culminates with a visit from an evaluation team that can last from several days to a week.

Many educators find the self-study a valuable process. "It was intensive, and we learned a great deal about our strengths," said an education counselor in the Home Instruction Department at the nationally-recognized, private Calvert School in Baltimore. "We examined every department, our curriculum, our communications with parents. The self-examination was a positive and worthwhile process." Calvert's courses are approved by the Maryland State Department of Education, the Commission on Elementary Schools division of the Middle States Association, and its home schooling curriculum has become the first to receive accreditation from the Commission on International and Transregional Accreditation.

A local school board member in Pennsylvania also makes the case that Middle States accreditation is both important and useful because it gives the school board an outside analysis of the district's financial and policy handling of its schools.

But he recognizes that the accreditation does not address issues of educational quality. "It's an administrative monitoring system and it has nothing to do with the educational quality of the school," said the West York Area School District board member. "It has nothing to do

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DOES ACCREDITATION OF YOUR SCHOOL MEAN QUALITY?

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with the teachers' performance in the classroom. Our main mission is to educate children and the Middle States evaluation has nothing to do with that."

Further illustrating the gap between accreditation and educational quality, two inner-city high schools in Philadelphia accredited by the Middle States Association were deemed so bad a couple of years ago that they were "reconstituted" with a whole new staff. Both Audenreid and Olney High Schools continue to struggle. As recently as 1998, more than 90 percent of students at both schools tested below the basic (lowest) level in all subjects on the SAT-9 (Stanford Achievement Test-Ninth Version).

Prodded by all the activity in the states around standards, assessments and school report

cards, the regional accrediting bodies have recognized that to justify their continued existence they must reinvent themselves and target academic issues instead of concentrating primarily on facilities and administrative procedures.

Meanwhile, among the best ways for parents to evaluate education at a school is to examine the school report cards issued by the states. The report cards show how well students performed on standardized tests and how they compare with other schools in the district and state. Report cards also display demographic data that can offer insights into educational outcomes. They are not always very user-friendly, but can often tell you more about whether your child's school is performing than a stamp of "accreditation."

Good Websites for Parents

Parents interested in the home school option for their children can find a wealth of information on these three websites – including information on how to get started, curriculum information, support group lists, legal and legislative information, college information, and more. They, in turn, provide a wealth of links to other information resources.

www.hslda.org – The Home School Legal Defense Association, whose website is a particularly rich source

of information for parents approaching home schooling from a Christian or religious perspective.

www.nhen.org – The National Home Education Network, which links a diverse group of home-schoolers using the internet and other forms of electronic networking.

www.calvertschool.org – Home page of the renowned Calvert School, which offers a homeschool curriculum widely in use.



Did You Know???

- 37 states have charter school laws
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Community Colleges: Educating Today's High Schoolers



The cure for skimpy, inadequate high school course offerings is often as close as the nearest community college.

In the past decade, the search for more challenging academic fare has led thousands of high school juniors and seniors to community colleges where the courses they take may satisfy high school graduation requirements, in addition to giving them a jump on a college degree.

Currently 23 states permit "dual enrollment," a policy allowing high school students to take college courses without sacrificing their high school status or eligibility to participate in extra curricular activities.

Between 1993 and 1997, according to the latest available data, the percentage of under-18 part-time enrollment in community colleges rose from 1.6 percent to 4.9 percent, an increase of 206 percent in four years.

There are many reasons why high schools fail to meet the educational needs of some students. One is related to geography: Rural states such as Utah and Vermont typically have small schools that cannot offer the wide array of course choices found in larger, comprehensive, metropolitan area high schools.

Indeed rural schools everywhere face similar problems.

Long before their junior year, gifted students often tear through the most advanced classes that even a big high school can offer. But average high school students who have carefully plotted a college preparatory curriculum also frequently find that they have run out of courses to take by the middle of their junior or senior year. Some succumb to the "senior slump," take only one or two courses and loaf or work a part-time job. But more and more of these students, recognizing the advantages to an early start on a costly college education, are signing up for classes at community colleges.

Capturing disengaged high school students is a community college success story, and not only

in Vermont. Sometimes transporting these students just for a class or two into the more challenging environment of a community college puts students who never considered themselves college material on a college track.

"High schools don't work for every student," observes Bette Matkowski, Dean of Enrollment at the Community College of Vermont, the state's only community college.

Matkowski sees three distinct groups of teenagers at the school's 12 branches: Those looking for enrichment or advanced courses because their high school doesn't offer them, home-schooled students whose parents lack the expertise to teach a particular subject, and disengaged students who mentally have dropped out of high school.

Vermont is not a "dual enrollment" state, so parents must pay the community college course fees unless federal funds kick in for eligible students. Despite the \$406 cost of a three-credit course, the Community College of Vermont counts about 250 under-18-year-olds among its 8,000 to 9,000 students.

In some places, such partnerships are frowned upon by high schools. Politics, money and union power are all factors in the turf wars that occur as states seek to offer students more educational choices.

But there are striking examples of cooperation and innovation.

Willow River High School in Duluth, Minnesota, is a rural school with only 600 students in grades K-12. The school was financially strapped, didn't have many academic options to offer, and its kids weren't going on to college. Willow River stood to lose about \$5,000 in state per pupil aid for every student they lost.

In order to keep their students, Willow River turned to the Internet and Lake Superior College, a nearby institution with an enrollment of about 3,000 that offered on-line college courses. Now, every semester, 20 of Willow River's top students are selected to participate in an Honors on-line college credit program offered by Lake Superior.

Normandale Community College in Bloomington — Minnesota's largest community college with an enrollment of about 7,500 — each semester enrolls about 500 high school students in college level courses. Freshman English and college algebra are among the most popular courses. Many students take 15 to 18 credits a semester and most do so during the regular school day, furnishing their own transportation to school.

In the South, Alabama turned to dual enrollment and the community colleges in 1997 after more rigorous high school graduation requirements kicked in. The new standards require students to take four years of math, English, science and social studies plus pass a high school exit exam.

Some systems in the state couldn't meet the higher requirements with their existing course offerings. Others had students who had exhausted all Advanced Placement and honors courses offered at their high school. Dual enrollment seemed to be the answer for both groups. Students need a "B" average or higher to participate. By enrolling in college courses, they receive both college and high school credit. It takes six semester hours of college courses to constitute one high school credit.

Davenport Central High School in Iowa also offers community college classes right on the premises of the high school. More than 300 of the 1,400 students in the high school are taking one or more college classes through Scott Community College, located six miles away, according to Associate Principal Reginald Shoemith. As in Minnesota, the Iowa high school sees the arrangement with the community college as a good deal for everyone.

And while few can disagree that there's great merit in extending education opportunities such as these to all our students, the community college route may also reflect the inability of American public high schools to keep up with the needs of American high school students.