

Homeschooling - An Option for Parents and Children

By Judith Munday M.A., M.Ed.

Nationwide, there has been steady growth in families who teach their children at home. The National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) reported in February 2003 there are an estimated 1.7-2.1 million children taught at home. These families come from diverse cultures and have a variety of religious persuasions and different educational backgrounds. (NHERI.org/content/view/174/62/) Over seven percent of students taught at home have special needs. <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/home-school>) The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) estimates that more than percent of home-schooled children have special needs. ("Court Report," www.hslda.org on-line newsletter, Vol.16, no.6.)

Reasons for Homeschooling

A significant fraction of home educators teach their own children as a way to ensure the child receives an education founded on the principles and doctrines of a particular faith. Some of these parents teach under Virginia's unique Religious Exemption option. Their religious convictions lead them to teach their own children and guard them from worldly or humanistic influences that they view as threats to the child's spiritual well-being. Other families chose homeschooling because they are dissatisfied with the academic instruction in the child's public schools. In the NHERI report cited above, more than 16 percent surveyed expressed dissatisfaction with the child's [public school] academic instruction. Virginia's homeschooling laws give parents a wide degree of freedom to teach at home and to safeguard what they believe is in their child's best interest.

Virginia's Home School Statute provides four options for parents.¹ Options 1, 2, and 3 do not specifically require that parents follow Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs), although SOLs do provide a helpful overview for grade level curriculum. Families can freely select from different programs of study and curriculum. Children who are taught under Option 4 of Virginia's Home Schooling Statute must "provide a program of study or curriculum which, in the judgment of the division superintendent, includes the standards of learning objectives adopted by the Board of Education for language arts and mathematics and provides evidence that the parent is able to provide an adequate education for the child." (Virginia Home School Statute, 22.1-254.)

In some circumstances, qualified homeschooled children participate in academic classes, 2 and electives, as well as extra-curricular activities in the public school

Is it worth it to teach a child with special needs? Many parents answer with a resounding "YES!" Can it be done successfully - even without special training? YES! A parent knows the needs and strengths of a child better than anyone, and in the 21st century, there is a wealth of support and encouragement for the teaching parent. Even when the child has experienced frustration and/or failure in other settings, at home he/she often becomes a more enthusiastic learner. The child is freed from excessive pressures of SOL-driven curriculum and the pacing of regular school schedules. Parents will seldom find teaching an easy job, but they can successfully educate their child in the home.

Understanding the Child's Learning Style

Unless the child has been diagnosed with a specific learning disability, the parent may incorrectly attribute academic deficits to inadequate teaching skills or blame the child. It is essential to evaluate the child in a timely manner to start appropriate interventions. Research consistently indicates that the earlier a child's needs are understood and identified, the more likely it is that remediation can be effective. Testing can be done through the public school or evaluations can be done at the parents' expense.

Financial Concerns

Some children have needs that are too extensive or severe to progress in the home setting without outside intervention and therapies that must be delivered through highly trained professions. The costs of related services, such as occupational, physical, speech or language therapy, can exceed the family's ability to pay, and the parent must decide whether to seek those services from the public schools. This can be a very difficult decision, especially if the parent is reluctant to have contact with public schools.

Using Public School Services

Parents who desire help from the public school must ask the local school about available support services. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, (IDEIA) has a new Equitable

Participation provision. It requires local educational agencies (LEA) identify every child in their locale who has special needs - including those in private and/or homeschools. Parents of homeschooled children need to know the law allows them to make a request to have the child evaluated by the schools in order to determine whether the child has special needs. Under IDEA this evaluation is available at no cost to the family. Testing typically assesses intellectual ability (I.Q.), reading, writing, spelling and math. Additional testing may be necessary to measure the child's speech, language, and neurological, physical, and emotional development. (Federal Register/Vol. 71, No. 156 /August 14, 2006 /Rules and Regulations)

If the parent decides to seek help from the public schools, professionals administer tests to determine whether a child is a "child with a disability." The local educational agency (LEA) determines eligibility for special education services. (Virginia Regulations 8 VAC 20-80-66.) Private school placement.) 34 CFR §300.452 (a) 1. The provisions of this subsection shall apply to children who are home instructed or home tutored in accordance with the Code of Virginia. The provisions of this subsection shall apply to children who are home instructed or home tutored in accordance with the Code of Virginia. Should the homeschool child be found eligible for special education services, the LEA works with the parent to create a Service Plan. This may not provide the depth and range of services available to the public school student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) The school may recommend the child be enrolled in public school special education to benefit from a wider range of services. Parents must then decide whether to continue with home schooling or move the child to the public school setting.

Demonstrating Progress for the School Year

Under the Virginia Home School Statute, parents (except those taught by certified tutor or under the religious exemption) can submit one of the following as evidence of progress: 1) The results of a standardized test score at or above the 23rd percentile or 2) An evaluation or assessment determined by the division superintendent indicating that the child is making an "adequate level of educational growth and progress." Thus a child can be tested individually with a variety of tests, or parents may submit portfolios to local evaluators.

Evidence of progress can be an evaluation letter from a person licensed to teach in any state; or a person with a master's degree or higher in an academic discipline; or a report card or transcript from a community college, college, college distance-learning program or home-education correspondence school. Children with complex learning problems often need one-on-one testing with trained professionals. If annual testing shows inadequate progress, the homeschool can be placed on a year-long probation. Parents need to realize that should

the child/children again fail to progress the following year, schools can begin proceedings to return the child to public school.

Advantages to Teaching Your Child at Home

As previously mentioned, the parent knows the child's strengths and weaknesses and unique learning style better than anyone else. Homeschool settings do not have distractions and frequent interruptions in daily routine typical for regular school classrooms. Unlike public school teachers, who are mandated toward a set of specific objectives for SOL tests each spring, parents can adjust pacing and difficulty level for each separate area of the curriculum. Parents can provide many alternatives to paper and pencil testing. If the student requires additional time or practice to achieve mastery, the parent can provide for the child's needs. The parent's knowledge of the child and available teacher handbooks provide help for parents as they teach, including ways to modify or change assignments.

With the increased popularity of home education, parents have access to a constantly growing range of resources to support teaching. These resources are easily located with online Internet search tools. Nationwide, there are many homeschool choices that include online academies, stores with grade-level curriculum materials and testing services, DVD instruction packages, and end-of-year record keeping and testing. Web sites specifically devoted to special needs are easy to find with most Internet search engines, and they offer links to major national organizations and research findings. Local support groups are an important component to successful home teaching for all home schooling parents. Many have co-ops with classes in major academic subjects, sports, arts and music electives as well as field trips and group discounts for sites of interest statewide and ticketed performances. *See Resources at the end of this article.*

Challenges of Teaching Your Child at Home

No matter how skillful or intuitive the parent's teaching, a child's needs may not be fully met by one-on-one instruction. Many students with special needs require a complex of support services from private providers at the parents' expense. Yearly individualized assessments can be costly, especially if there is more than one child. It can be challenging to locate supportive related service providers and resources, and these services, such as speech or occupational therapy, also add to the time required of home education.

Parents often face pressures and intimidation from family or professionals, even when they do a superior job. Parents of a child with special needs frequently share learning or attention issues similar to the child. For example, a child with ADD often has a parent with ADD, and that parent may find it difficult to sustain focused, structured teaching on a daily basis. The

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mingling of parenting and teaching can blur boundaries and expectations. It becomes easy to suggest "the child is not trying." The child may be discouraged or end up in conflict with the parent, and homeschool difficulties spill over into behavior difficulties.

Socialization

In recent years, there has been considerable media attention on the question of socialization for children in a homeschool setting. Homeschooled children who have delayed or inadequate social skills are less subject to negative peer comments, bullying and teasing common among school children. There is little research to support the claim that the child taught at home lacks adequate social skills. Homeschool co-ops provide ample group interactions, as do community youth sports leagues, community activities and field trips. Because the homeschool schedule is more flexible than

public school schedules, students can attend a wide range of community events, educational and art activities, and visit local/historic attractions all over Virginia. Travel is easier to schedule, and educational goals can be interlinked with any family vacation.

Conclusion

All over Virginia, parents have successfully taught children with special needs at home. There are many resources and supports available and parents now have genuine alternatives to public school special education services. Whatever their reasons, parents who feel strongly that the child should be taught at home can look forward to successfully helping each child move forward with academic and life skills. ■

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Footnotes and Resources

1. Virginia Compulsory Attendance and Home Instruction Related Statutes, excerpted from the code of Virginia 1950, as amended -- 22.1-254 online at Virginia Department of Education's website (www.pen.k12/va/us) See also www.lexisnexis.com/educationlaw/pdfs/virginia_sample.pdf

2. Code of Virginia §22.1-253.13:2(N) "Students enrolled in a public school on a less than full-time basis shall be counted in average daily membership (ADM) in the relevant school division. Students who are either (i) enrolled in a nonpublic school or (ii) receiving home instruction pursuant to §22.1-254.1, and who are enrolled in public school on a less than full-time basis in any mathematics, science, English, history, social science, vocational education, fine arts, foreign language course, or health and physical education shall be counted in the average daily membership (ADM) in the relevant school division on a pro rata basis as provided in the appropriation act.

3. To the extent consistent with their number and location in the state, provision must be made for

the participation of private school children with disabilities in the program carried out under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (20 USC § 1400 et seq.) by providing them with special education and related services in accordance with a services plan developed and implemented under this subsection. 34 CFR §300.452 (a) 1. The provisions of this subsection shall apply to children who are home instructed or home tutored in accordance with the Code of Virginia. 2. Each local school division shall ensure that a services plan is developed and implemented for each private school child with a disability.

Resource Websites

- www.helpinschool.net
Helpful site for those who teach children with special needs
- www.heav.org
Home Educators Assoc of Virginia
- www.vahomeschoolers.org
Virginia Home Schoolers Assoc.
- www.hslda.org
Home School Legal Defense Association

- www.specialneedsadvocate.com/special_needs.htm

Attorney Pete Wright's advocacy site

- www.thetestinglady.com
Testing information for home schooling families in Virginia
- www.groups.yahoo.com/special-needs-homeschool
Support group within Yahoo
- www.homeschoolcentral.com
Click on Special Needs
- www.suite101.com/course.cfm/17312/overview/8209

A course to guide parents through the decision to homeschool

- www.brightword.com/homeschooling-special-needs.html
Parent friendly web site about teaching children with special needs at home
- www.mooreexpressions.com
Home School book store online, based in Virginia
- http://homeschooling.about.com/od/specneeds/Homeschooling_Special_Needs.htm
Informational website
- <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?000+cod+22.1-254.1>
Details of Virginia policies for homeschooling