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Partnering with homeschoolers: Part time education in public schools

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Partnering with Homeschoolers

More and more home-schooled students are entering public schools part-time. Will you be ready for them in your classroom and school?

A population that is growing steadily each year, homeschoolers are, or soon will be, at a school near you! Many states permit home-schooled students to partake of public school programs on a part-time basis. Parents can often pick and choose what level of involvement they wish their children to have in their neighborhood school. This current emphasis on school choice has spurred many opportunities—but also some concern and debate. On what ground can educators and home-schooling parents meet to achieve what they both strive for—a quality education for all students?

What all home-schooling parents have in common is their desire to provide their children with the best education.

This new partnership presents its own set of questions. How can we effectively integrate homeschooled students into schools, districts, and programs? What can individual schools do to help home-schooled students make the transition into the public school classroom? And what can students learn from one another? Any program that attempts to integrate a new population of students into the existing one raises similar issues. We asked the same kind of questions when we chose to mainstream disabled students. We ask them when we integrate various cultures into the classroom. The first step, as always, begins with awareness.

Who Are Homeschoolers, and What Do They Want?

Teachers must get to know who their students are and what makes them tick before they can teach them successfully. Home-schooled students are no exception. Home schooling is now a part of mainstream society, and homeschoolers represent all ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and levels of education. You are just as likely to meet a home-schooling mother who left her medical practice to teach her children as you would one who finished only high school. What all homeschooled parents have in common is their desire to provide their children with the best education.

Why do parents choose to homeschool their children? Among the variety of reasons, parents most often cite religious conviction. These parents want to promote their beliefs and values to their children and realize that to accomplish this, they must be responsible for their education. Many of these students have never been in a classroom setting—they have been at home from day one.

Another reason for homeschooling is dissatisfaction with the public school curriculum. For example, parents of gifted or disabled students are sometimes displeased with the quality of education that their children receive in public school and may choose to work with them one-on-one instead. These parents are more likely to return to the schools if they find opportunities that fulfill their children’s needs. Some parents choose to keep their children home for one year to help them catch up with their studies so that they may return to school more confident and up to speed.

A small percentage of parents choose home schooling because they do not subscribe to the philosophy that has come to define public school in recent decades. They prefer to maintain their own values and not to give authority away to the schools. Again, they are taking full responsibility for all aspects of their child’s education.

Finally, more often at the secondary level, parents choose to homeschool to avoid negative peer pressure and violence in schools. Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, is symptomatic of our times. And, I can almost guarantee that on that day in April 1999, any parent who was on the fence about home schooling made the decision: It’s safer at home.

What you may notice is that these parents all take an active interest in their child’s education. Ironically, these are the kinds of parents we wish we had more of in schools. Well, many are choosing to come back, at least part-time. Will they be welcome in your school or classroom?
If they have never been in school before, students must learn certain school behaviors—such as raising hands, following schedules, walking in line, and not talking out of turn.

First Contact

For the school. Any number of people might be a homeschooler’s first contact in your school. The front office staff, the guidance counselor, the teacher, and even the principal have the opportunity to make a lasting first impression. What impression would you like to make? You represent not just your school but public schools everywhere.

Recently, a parent told me of her first contact with her neighborhood school. She knew that she could enroll her son part-time in art or music and was excited by the prospect. The first person she spoke to was the school’s principal. From the start of the conversation, it was obvious that the principal had never thought about what he would do if confronted with such a request. He laughed and said, “Why in the world would you want to bring your son here part-time when you’ve already rejected the system?” She explained that she knew what a fine reputation the art and music program had and that she would like very much for her son to be part of it. The principal was discouraging. The parent knew that she had a right to this program, but she left feeling disappointed. She didn’t want to make waves and brand homeschoolers as troublemakers. Unfortunately, the principal wasn’t aware of the impact he made that day.

Teachers are often a homeschooler’s first contact. Jenny Mitchell found herself face-to-face with a home-schooling family who visited school on their “field trip.” This family was deciding whether Justin, the oldest, would benefit from Jenny’s gifted class. “I didn’t know what to expect,” explained Jenny. “They asked if they could sit in and observe.” The family of four sat in the back of Jenny’s class for almost two hours. Midway through their visit, Jenny suggested that Justin sit among her students and participate when he felt like it. Jenny was amazed at his grasp of the subject. He fit right in, even though he had never been in school before. Two years later, Jenny and the family still have a mutually pleasant alliance. The only advice Jenny has for teachers is to “be prepared to be a field trip!”

For the parents. School officials aren’t the only ones wary of this partnership. Linda, who has homeschooled her four children from their prekindergarten years, came to me quite anxious. She wanted her 6th grade daughter to take Spanish at her local middle school. She believed that this was a better environment for her daughter to learn the language because of the interaction with peers. But she wondered what she should ask the teacher during their first meeting.

I told her to be honest with the teacher about her goals for her daughter and to let the teacher see her heart. Linda was fearful of a confrontation and an interrogation about why she homeschools. I suggested that she offer the information up front to get it out of the way and to project herself as the confident home-schooling parent that I knew she was. Her conference went very well, and her daughter now attends middle school one period each day. It is a good match.

For the students. Adults aren’t the only ones who have a lot to learn from this new association. The homeschooled student and his or her public school peers will be influenced by each
other. Some parents may fear negative peer pressure. Some students may not be up for the challenge. I advise placing students only into situations that they are mature enough to handle wisely. Home-schooling parents have the ability to monitor closely how their children respond and can pull them out if necessary. But most home-schooled students do well when they enter the regular classroom. Their adjustment period is brief, and their mainstreaming is typically successful.

If they have never been in school before, students must learn certain school behaviors—such as raising hands, following schedules, walking in line, and not talking out of turn. Ben, a 5th grader, had difficulty adjusting to his new school schedule. When he opened up his bag lunch at 10:30 a.m. because he was ready for a break and a snack, his teacher gently explained that he needed to wait until the assigned lunchtime to eat. His classmates giggled, but Ben wasn’t ruffled. He returned to his work until lunchtime. It’s better for the teacher to assume that the students know nothing of their customs and to introduce them accordingly.

If the child is having great difficulty adjusting, parents will want to help. They are usually easy to work with and believe strongly in the partnership with teachers. Let them know immediately if their child is having difficulty, and they will do whatever it takes to make this transition smoother for everyone involved.

Public school peers will learn some interesting things about home-schooled students: that homeschoolers are often independent learners who are not easily distracted; that they may even be high achievers. But most important, they learn that homeschoolers are normal kids who live in a family, like to play, sometimes don’t get along with their parents, and are hurt just as easily as their peers.

Community Partners

Homeschoolers are just normal kids with parents who undertake an important responsibility—one into which they do not enter lightly. Educate yourself further about them. Each state regulates homeschoolers differently, so investigate your state’s laws. Become informed about opportunities available to homeschoolers in your community’s public schools. Teachers especially can have a more direct role in the education of home-schooled students. They can sign up to be home-school evaluators for their district’s home-school support group or public school liaison office. This will give teachers the chance to see a home-schooling family in action and offer support when needed.

As a public school advocate, you have the power to present your school and its programs in a positive light. Tout your strengths, and you will attract innumerable parents who will in turn sing your praises. Don’t be caught unaware and ignorant—or the opposite may happen. Word spreads quickly in the home-schooling community. Be aware of the political impact that a partnership with homeschoolers may make. It is in every school’s best interest to serve any and all of its students. Are you ready?

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