

Homeschooling vs. Public School at Home

“Homeschooling is truly the most private of private education where families have taken the high responsibility and joy of teaching their own children...without the help or interference of the government.” ~Tom Lewis, *Chairman Emeritus, Arizona Families for Home Education*

Homeschooling refers to instruction provided primarily in the child’s home, the majority of which is planned and implemented by the parent or other person who has custody of the child. The homeschool parent or guardian maintains complete control and responsibility for the child’s education. Within this basic definition, home schools can incorporate a broad range of methods and materials including textbooks, workbooks, correspondence courses, video instruction, computerized curriculum and online classes. However, homeschoolers aren’t the only students attending school in their homes these days.

Virtual public schools that make use of online educational technology have sprung up around the country. A virtual school attempts to combine the parental involvement and individualized attention of homeschooling with the accountability of a structured and supervised curriculum. These virtual schools are organized as charter schools, utilizing public school funds. By offering virtual classes, school districts hope to minimize the number of students they lose to private schools and homeschooling. Another advantage is that they can enroll more students and increase the amount of state aid received without the cost of having to build new classrooms. It is also an economical way for them to meet the needs of home-bound students, those in remote areas, students unable to attend class during regular school hours, and children of mobile parents.

Virtual schools entice families to sign up by offering free tuition, computer, printer, internet access, textbooks, software, and more. These “schools without walls” are set up like close-knit communities. Teachers and students interact with each other via chat rooms, email, and electronic bulletin boards. Students may be invited to participate in school field trips as well as other learning and social opportunities. Sound too good to be true? Of course, all of these items are paid for with tax dollars. Such publicly subsidized educational programs and their accompanying freebies can be quite tempting to families who are struggling financially. As the saying goes, however, “there’s no such thing as a free lunch.” Government benefits always come with strings attached, ultimately leading to increased government control, surveillance, and bureaucracy.

Nevertheless, virtual public schools are attracting parents who otherwise might not homeschool their children or who are reluctant to get started homeschooling without the assistance of an authority figure telling them what to do. But while public virtual schools and homeschool programs may be similar in some ways, they have significant philosophical and practical differences. The fact is, if parents enroll their child in one of these virtual schools, they will not be homeschool parents – they will be public school parents. Likewise, parental delegation of control to either a public or private school program outside the home – even if the classes are taken in the home – means that the students enrolled in them are not homeschoolers.

Parents who place their children in a virtual public school are subject to restrictions and regulations that are not imposed on homeschool families. They have to use whatever curriculum is provided as part of the package. Religious content cannot legally be incorporated into lessons taught through these programs. The student’s attendance is monitored and their instructional time is logged. Grades are determined by a certified teacher, not the parent. These teachers have access to the family’s lesson plan and vacation schedule. Students are required to take annual

standardized tests at the time and place stipulated by their state or school district. The computer systems and non-consumable materials must be returned when the student leaves the school.

Ironically, even though parents of virtual school students relinquish control of their parental right to direct their child's education, they still have a lot of work to do keeping up with all of the requirements. It seems that if these parents are going to be at home during the day with their children anyway, they should be encouraged to take advantage of the freedom they have to educate their children without government oversight or interference. In a real homeschool setting the parents choose the curriculum, customize the teaching, and personally evaluate the student's performance without the hassle of having someone constantly looking over their shoulder.

Unfortunately, the distinction between homeschooling and public school at home can be confusing. For example, you can purchase the K12® curriculum as an independent homeschooling family, or you can enroll in the tuition-free K12® public virtual academy which uses the same curriculum. It would be very easy for new and inexperienced home school families to enter into a publicly funded virtual school if they simply aren't aware of the difference. A good rule of thumb is, if a virtual school is advertised as "tuition-free" or "no tuition," it must be a public school program. On the other hand, if a virtual academy has a biblically-based curriculum or if it requires payment, it's not a public school program. In most cases, they will specify in their literature or on their website (i.e., a list of frequently asked questions) whether it is a homeschool or public school program. If you are unsure, ask them.

It's great that parents have so many options when choosing the type of education they want for their children – whether it be a public school, charter school, private school, home school, or virtual school. However, for the purposes of membership in our local support group, enrollment in a public school program or virtual academy is not considered home education. Homeschooling has been and always will be a cherished freedom for American families, and it is probably the best educational process for promoting creative thinking and a free society. If we don't maintain a distinct difference between homeschooling and doing public school at home, the whole point of home education may be lost.

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Did You Know...? The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) does not accept families whose children are enrolled in a virtual charter school. According to HSLDA, such programs: 1.) Create a little public school in your home. 2.) Provide more profit for the public school. 3.) Limit parental freedom and bring regulation. 4.) Restrict religious freedom. For a detailed description of each of these four issues, please visit the following link: <http://www.hsllda.org/docs/nche/000010/200206260.asp>. For more information about HSLDA's position on charter schools and public school independent study programs, see question #12 on their FAQ page: <http://www.hsllda.org/docs/faqs/default.asp?q012>.

Additional Information

http://www.afhe.org/resources/articles/arizona_virtual_academy_review%20_2004_.pdf (AFHE Reviews the Arizona Virtual Academy, by Carol Shippy)

http://www.afhe.org/resources/articles/article_christy_myers.pdf ("All That Glitters is Not Gold," by Christy Myers.)