

Homeschooling is best option for many teens



By
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Homeschooling provides an effective, affordable, and exciting educational alternative for over a million youth in this country, and its impact on adolescent education is particularly inspiring. As one of the directors of Pathfinder Learning Center, which works with homeschooling teens and their families in the Pioneer Valley, I would like to clarify our mission and respond to some of the Amherst superintendent's concerns which were included in the article in the Aug. 15 Bulletin.

Teens are ready and able to learn from people other than their parents. Homeschooling parents must develop an educational play with (or for) their children. The parents must see that the resources needed are available and that follow-through occurs. Parents may, but need not be, the instructors. Homeschooling families often employ tutors, friends, and relatives to provide help.

Homeschooling teens can work independently, seeking help when needed. Youth are frequently involved in internships, community service, and work outside of their homes pursuing their interests in real-life settings. The fact that parents of homeschooling teens often provide little direct instruction may be a surprise to outsiders, but it is common practice throughout the country, it is legal, and upon reflection, it is logical.

Pathfinder helps families create their curriculum plans, provides a safe and comfortable atmosphere for homeschooling students to meet and socialize, hosts a full calendar of study groups and activities, tutors and helps arrange tutoring, and helps teens find internships with adults and workplaces in the community.

Our success resides in the individual

stories of our members. One young woman displayed her art in Henion's Bakery, selling three pieces and receiving an invitation to illustrate a book. Another member interned at this bakery, showing up once a week at 4 a.m. to bake bread. One young man learned a particular computer programming language and scored the highest of 180 people who took a placement test for hiring using this language.

We have seen several of our members enroll in courses at local universities and perform well. One young woman left school during her junior year, homeschooled, and gained early admission and a full scholarship to Bennington College. Another young woman who has been dancing seriously has just won a position with a professional dance company.

The superintendent expressed concerns regarding non-reporting families, parents who he believes take homeschooling lightly, working parents supervising homeschoolers, and students with any failing grades being allowed to begin homeschooling.

We encourage our members to comply with state law on homeschooling and to file plans and progress reports to the superintendent. He has the responsibility of monitoring these families, and is understandably concerned if many homeschoolers fail to submit reports. We suggest he work to ensure that his communication with homeschooling families is clear and then hold these non-reporting families accountable for their choices.

We see few parents who take on homeschooling lightly, and it is certainly not in our interest to work with such parents. The parents we know care deeply about their children, and are worried about providing the best learning option for them. Even more, the teens we work with do not leave school lightly. They have the most at stake, and they want to be as happy and successful as their parents and the superintendent want them to be.

The decision to leave the security of school and its future diploma does not come easily for parents or teenagers. In those cases where homeschooling is not appropriate, most parents and teens do not

wait for the superintendent to tell them so before they make new plans.

We share the superintendent's and the community's concern that teens have a safe place to gather. This concern is why Pathfinder is open from 9-5:30 Monday through Friday, year-round. We encourage other community members to step forward to offer teens a greater range of comfortable places to spend time.

In terms of monitoring behavior, we see supervision as a parental concern, not an educational issue. Homeschooling parents should be free to make decisions about their children's whereabouts with the same freedom that in-school parents arrange after-school or summertime plans. As far as we know, the youth we work with are not engaging in dangerous or destructive behaviors. If we learned otherwise, we would certainly report such behavior to parents, police, or DSS. We understand the concerns about delinquency and neglect, but without evidence of misbehavior, supervision is and should remain a family matter.

The suggestion that students who are failing one academic class should be denied access to alternative learning arrangements seems punitive and potentially harmful. Pathfinder members include students who have been high-achievers in school and now use the freedom of homeschooling to fly into their interests. Similarly, we work with under-achieving students to help them use the freedom of homeschooling to rediscover a love of learning. Restricting struggling students such an option consigns them to what appears to be an endless cycle of school-defined failure. We do not see how such a rule might benefit youth.

Pathfinder is a non-profit organization which makes an alternative available to people who may otherwise have no alternative to public or private school. We are providing an original community service, that exists nowhere else in this country, and we seek to contribute to the community, not divide it. We invite community members who believe in the need for educational alternatives to visit and to support our efforts.