Online Homeschooling: An Alternative to Traditional High School
INTRODUCTION

Education is an essential and developmental cornerstone for adolescents preparing for adult life and a bright future. The experiences and lessons learned from attending an academic institution shape their future and create opportunity. Although traditional school systems work for certain students, they can sometimes fail the nontraditional learner. Parents and adolescents are left to leverage academic options and online resources to gain access to different paths.

This piece explores how homeschooling and online learning have naturally collided as two different worlds into a cohesive successful academic alternative. An at-home online educational environment is more suitable for many nontraditional learners, whether because of special academic needs, illness, home responsibilities or emotional challenges stemming from bullying or other situations.

Parents and students should consider the following insights advocating a home-based and richly varied academic structure supported by an online schooling provider like Penn Foster, a licensed private high school offering an accredited high school diploma. Analysis is driven by the following data:

- Recent online homeschool data
- In-house Penn Foster survey and result analysis
- Interviews and testimonials
- Mainstream media resources and editorial opinion

Addressing the evolution of online homeschooling and how the Penn Foster program ties in starts with examining the traditional school system and how technology has brought structure and scale to homeschooling options.

THE GROWTH AND RISE OF HOMESCHOOLING

The current mainstream high school education system is fueled by thousands of teachers trained in the latest educational strategies and techniques, as well as a curriculum designed to meet state standards and national levels of acceptance. In its very nature, the system is developed for the majority, despite the varied levels of instruction and support services. And before cutting-edge technology like virtual portals and interactive activities, this type of system was at one time the only option for teaching diverse students from various backgrounds.
However, with technology we have options for meeting the needs of a diverse student base. Learning experiences differ widely from child to child. For example, mainstream education may not work for students who have trouble making it to school every day or difficulty learning in the structured classroom. For any parent who questions if the traditional school system is the best type of environment for their child, online homeschooling arises as an effective option.

Moving a student from the traditional system to a homeschooling environment doesn’t even have to be entirely driven by academics. Unfortunately, at times bullying can create a combative and hostile environment for a nontraditional learner. The emotional effects of bullying can have a direct effect on a child’s ability to academically focus, learn and grow. If a child is a victim of persistent bullying and responses aren’t remedying the problem, even “short-term homeschooling can defuse tensions and reduce a child’s severe stress,” according to Laura Brodie, Ph.D. of PsychologyToday.com. In these special circumstances, homeschooling can serve as an emotional and practical alternative, as well as an academic alternative. Special circumstances that influence the homeschooling option can also include illness and home responsibilities affecting attendance.

**Homeschooling Option**

The concept of homeschooling typically involves the parent serving as a de-facto teacher. In the traditional sense, they are responsible for providing their kids with a personalized education based on the delivery of print-based curriculums using a physical mailing service. As our academic landscape has shifted to become more digitized and technology-based, so has homeschooling. For example, tablets have replaced textbooks as an engaging educational learning tool.

Whether a parent deploys a print or digital curriculum, homeschooling tailors education methods and teaches kids what they needed to know in an environment conducive to their specific learning needs.

Approximately three percent of the school-age population of children ages 5 to 17 were homeschooled in 2012, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. Interestingly, the data shows that 91 percent of those students had a parent who was concerned about their child’s educational environment or believed the system lacked the flexibility to deal with their child’s needs.
In our nation’s classrooms and hallways, teaching and learning isn’t always created equal. “What do you do in schools where you don’t have people to teach certain subjects?” asked Richard Culatta, director of the Office of Educational Technology within the Department of Education, in a recent interview with The Hill.

“What do you do for those kids who are disadvantaged by the zip code they live in? We have to ensure everyone has access to quality learning.”

Varied quality learning can be the challenge. The lack of quality learning is what may drive many parents to take on the role of teacher themselves in a home environment or enhance learning with an online nontraditional alternative. Quality learning can encompass the individual personalization of education with homeschooling and the progressive advancements of online learning.

**HOMESCHOOLING & ONLINE LEARNING COLLIDE**

When nontraditional learners can’t acclimate to a certain type of learning environment, require specialized attention or don’t receive sufficient support, they’re at risk and success is threatened by barriers. These barriers escalate and eventually cause these students to leave school altogether.

Failure to complete high school limits students from reaching their potential and shuts them off from opportunity. It can be a debilitating and damaging experience. Confidence is shattered. Re-engagement is at risk. A future open to higher education and a promising career seem impossible.

But the online homeschooling option can foster a supportive, successful and thriving environment. The evolution of homeschooling coincides with the evolution of technology. Homeschooling and technology go hand-in-hand. United, homeschooling and online learning can provide an enhanced customized learning experience for a nontraditional learner.

**The Effects of Online Learning**

In February 2014, Penn Foster conducted a survey among parents of high school students who had elected to take online classes for a variety of reasons. Many of them were concerned about the school environment (47.5 percent). Some were unimpressed by the quality of actual teaching (31.5 percent).
Most notably though, the survey's results show that online homeschooling was the right choice, and 53.2 percent of respondents revealed that it had been a joint decision.

Mattan Griffel, a teacher at General Assembly and a contributor for The Huffington Post, shares how technology can enhance the homeschooling experience in the following ways:

• Instructors can measure and respond to students' behaviors more easily and quickly
• Technology can efficiently provide data and information that enable instructors to effectively adjust curriculums
• Online education personalizes learning and adapts to a particular student
• Technology equips instructors with a wide array of digital teaching tools

Online Learning & Homeschooling Success
Online homeschooling allows the student to set the pace and independently control the course of his/her learning process. Imagine a home-based education portal that is flexible, convenient and engaging. Imagine an online program created to tailor learning experiences and provide students with adequate resources to successfully earn a high school diploma.

THE PENN FOSTER SOLUTION
Online homeschooling is a way for nontraditional learners to attain the required educational qualifications to succeed while controlling how and when they learn best. Penn Foster’s online high school program advocates this optimal style of learning. The Penn Foster High School program currently has over 18,000 students enrolled and is designed to make the students’ needs a priority, while replicating the physical in-classroom experience through a virtual portal.
The Penn Foster Advantage
In our recent survey, we asked parents to list three reasons why they chose to enroll their child in a Penn Foster course, and 50.5 percent of respondents identified flexibility as the most important. An ability to graduate faster (40.8 percent), price (39.2 percent), accreditation (39.7 percent) and the chance to learn at the right pace (36.9 percent) followed behind.

Flexibility & Self-Paced Learning
“In any classroom, there will be some students who are behind and some who are ahead,” noted Griffel. “Even the best teacher in the world must deal with this tradeoff, which boils down to the following question: Should I slow down to help more students understand or speed up to cover more material? And so they inevitably end up settling on a pace and an educational approach somewhere in the middle.” Penn Foster offers an approach that promotes self-paced learning, enabling students to create their own study plan, set their own schedules and meet their own deadlines. Online programs can guide the curriculum, and digital tablet learning enhances the experience. This type of flexibility also provides the option for students to expedite the process and graduate sooner.

Support Systems & The New Role of Parents
Penn Foster equips homeschooling environments with available ongoing support. Social platforms, easy access to instructors and/or support staff, webinars, virtual clubs and collaborative associations are all included as part of the online homeschooling experience. Next-generation features expected to roll out even include an updated notification facility.

How do the parents fit in? An online learning program such as Penn Foster’s shifts the role of parents and takes away the pressure. Parents can step back from being the primary instructor and step into the role of coach, mentor or counselor. As a coach, a parent can help their child set goals and acquire the skills to achieve these goals, championing them through every failure and success. As a mentor, a parent can guide their child through any academic challenge. And as a counselor, a parent can emotionally support their child, help build confidence and develop successful academic habits.
Penn Foster Success Stories

Debbie is a mother of seven who has been homeschooling her children for more than 25 years. She admits that the process has been an integral part of her lifestyle for so long that the idea of educating any other way is alien to her.

“When they are in public school, you don’t know what is influencing them or what they are being exposed to,” says Debbie. “At least with Penn Foster, I have some idea of what is happening in their lives. And that has been a big help to me.”

“If I had it to do over, I would have been with Penn Foster for all these 26 years,” she added. “They have been amazing for us. The education part is great. They don’t just give you a grade. You have to study.”

Adriana Guy, a Penn Foster high school graduate, shared similar sentiments. “I ended up earning my diploma faster than I would have at my old regular high school. My mom and I liked that Penn Foster was accredited, at your own pace, you could transfer your credits, and that you could talk to teachers from the school.”

Adriana, who left school because of an illness, said she used to study during her vacations to make sure she could stay ahead of her peers, ensuring that she completed high school when she wanted.

“Mainstreaming for some kids works, but for some it doesn’t. And this [program] is a great option for kids who can’t get into school, for whatever the reason. Look at the options, what questions you want answered, what is the end result that you want from the program. The high school diploma is the key to moving on,” said Debbie Smith, mother of Mary, a Penn Foster student.

“When I first got sick, my mind was set on high school and not getting a diploma. If I don’t walk across the stage to receive it, then I didn’t do it,” she said. “But it doesn’t matter how you get your diploma, as long as you get it. If you feel comfortable doing it online, you should go ahead and do it.”
Earning an accredited high school diploma online from Penn Foster High School is attainable. Its flexibility, convenience and affordability position it to be a valuable option for homeschooling parents in need of an alternative. The curriculum is designed to fit seamlessly into any type of custom homeschooling structure. With an online solution, homeschooled students and their parents can focus on personal needs, develop good study habits, even schedule extracurricular activities and make earning a high school diploma an attainable reality.

CONCLUSION

“I highly recommend Penn Foster to all parents looking for a home schooling high school experience for their child. Your child will find it easier to succeed with all the supports in place, lifting self-esteem, and likewise, lifting grades. Best of all, parents, it won’t break your bank,” shared P.J. Thiessen, a parent of a Penn Foster student.

The approach to education for a young person isn’t dissimilar from an approach to sports and hobbies, for example. Just because one child may excel at football doesn’t mean he’ll shine in art. One child may love to read, but has no interest in playing a musical instrument, and that’s okay. Parents, educators and the academic community can honor the diversity of young people by designing curriculums and environments to support their individual learning styles.

Online homeschooling offers that learning customization, independence and most importantly, a gateway toward earning a high school diploma and seizing opportunity. Deviating from educational mainstreaming doesn’t imply inferiority or lack of quality. It simply denotes that while one type of experience works for one individual, a different type of experience works for another. The ultimate goal is to better serve the student, create an environment that cultivates optimal learning and help a young person thrive academically. Partnering homeschooling with online learning enables parents and students to collectively achieve that goal.
Penn Foster High School, founded in 1956, is an accredited, private online high school licensed by the Pennsylvania State Board of Private Licensed Schools. Take control of your child’s educational experience with Penn Foster’s affordable, flexible online high school diploma program and get your child college and career ready.
SOURCES

http://pennfostervirtualhighschool.com/
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mattan-griffel/the-case-for-online-educa_b_5329316.html
http://nces.ed.gov/FastFacts/display.asp?id=91
http://news.heartland.org/newspaper-article/2014/07/03/online-school-it-homeschooling

Materials (including testimonials and survey) provided by client
Telephone interviews with Deanna Walker, Adriana Guy, Debbie Smith

Own Knowledge