

Too Many Homeschooling Programs! How do I choose?

By Penny Ross



It seems that the number of homeschooling programs is growing faster than the number of homeschooling families! Here in California, types of programs include PSPs (private school satellite programs), home-based charter schools, online charters, learning centers, co-ops, hybrids – and innumerable variations of each. The sheer number of choices can quickly overwhelm you! Just how are you supposed to choose, anyway?

Before you succumb to glitzy brochures or persuasive recruiters, here are some questions you can ask to help you determine the best program for your particular family in this specific season of life:

1. Is this a public school program or a private school program?

While some homeschool programs are clearly public school programs and others are definitely private school programs, some of the unusual charter schools or hybrids end up looking more like private schools than public schools. However, all charter schools are independently-run public schools (sometimes known as “public schools of choice”). While public and charter school programs are tuition-free because they receive state funding, they are also subject to more dictates from the state and federal government. Private school programs have to charge tuition or recordkeeping fees to cover their operating costs.

2. What is the philosophical or religious orientation of the program?

Be sure to check out the vision or mission statement of the program. Is the program faith-based? Is it geared toward a particular academic orientation (such as creativity/the arts, science/math/engineering, early academics, or project-oriented learning)? Find out how the administrators of the program view particular parenting philosophies and how they address disagreements and conflict between students or families in the program.

3. How much freedom does the parent have in selecting curriculum?

Many public school programs and some charter schools provide the curriculum to the parents. Some programs have a warehouse or library from which to select materials; others give you the opportunity to order from a variety of sources using funds they provide in the form of a stipend. Private school programs usually expect you to purchase your own curriculum using your own funds. If you wish to incorporate religious materials into your teaching of academic subjects, you should enroll in a private school program because the California State Constitution prohibits public funds from being used to purchase faith-based resources.

4. Who determines the pace and workload of the student?

If your student is advanced, will this program allow a grade to be skipped? On the other hand, if your student is struggling in a particular area, can the subject or topic be put on hold for a while? Is there a certain amount of teaching time that must be accomplished daily or weekly? Do you have the freedom to schedule breaks when relatives come to visit or if you want to vacation during the off-season? Will the program accept late enrollment or transfers during the school year? Be sure you clearly understand which choices and decisions can be made by the parent and which ones are automatically determined by school policy.

5. What is the role of the parent: teacher, facilitator, or manager?

Is the parent in full control of the teaching process: determining how to teach, which assignments to be done, when pages or problems can be skipped, or when additional practice or review should be accomplished before moving on? Or is the parent more of a facilitator, having to seek approval from an overseeing teacher to deviate from the plan or seek approval to do things differently? Or is the parent merely managing and enforcing an already-determined lesson plan?

6. What group activities or classes are available?

Homeschool group classes are now common. Sometimes these are co-op classes in which a parent is expected to stay and help; sometimes they are drop-off programs. These classes can be a lifesaver if the primary teaching parent works part-time, but can also lead to overscheduled students and overly hectic lives. In my opinion, the ideal time to use a group class is for a subject in which your student excels and in which you are weak. For example, my oldest son absolutely loved science and by 8th grade, I was struggling to keep up with both the book and with him. When we moved him into a group biology class, he thrived under a passionate teacher who could answer all his questions and inspire him further. However, if your student really struggles in a subject and you feel unable to help him any longer, a private tutor may be a better solution. Above all, keep in mind that **homeschooling** should include time and teaching at home.

7. What type of support is available?

Does the program provide training or mentoring for new homeschool parents? If not, is assistance readily available elsewhere? Will you have opportunities to meet other parents so you can establish friendships and encourage each other? How much interaction is there between program staff and parents? Are any face-to-face meetings required? In short, will this program expect you to solve your own problems or is there a supportive network to assist you in your homeschooling?

8. Is testing required? If so, what kind?

Is standardized testing required, recommended, or discouraged? If it is offered, at what age/grade level does it start? Is it an older, nationally-recognized test like the Iowa, Stanford, or Terra Nova? Or is it one of the newer Common Core tests? Are there additional requirements for students who test poorly? Do parents get copies of the results? Who else sees the results? Does this school or test publisher report results to the databases being created as part of the Common Core Standards?

Additionally, if you have high school students, you will want to ask about transcripts and to find out how easily college entrance requirements can be met within the program.

There are many good homeschooling programs, but you want more than a good program. You want one which is a good fit for your students and for your family. Besides the above questions which can help you find your way through the maze of programs, you should consider the most important reasons that are leading you to homeschool. For my husband and me, our top two reasons were to inculcate our Christian faith into all areas of our children's education and to individualize the pace of teaching to the developmental timetable of our students. Neither freedom would have been available to us in a public or charter school program, even though the free tuition and curriculum stipend would have been a blessing for our family.

Each family has its own reasons for wanting to bring education home. As you prioritize those reasons and look at them alongside the answers you obtain to the questions listed above, your path to a good homeschool program for your family should become clearer.



Would you like to find out more about homeschooling? Schedule a private consultation with Penny or attend one of her introductory workshops “Homeschooling, the What, the Why, and the How.”

Penny Ross has been encouraging homeschool families for over 25 years: first as a leader of Hope Chapel Academy (a PSP, private-school-satellite-program in Hermosa Beach, CA) and now through her own business, Tools for the Home Educator, in Torrance, CA, where she offers consultations, curriculum, and classes for homeschool parents. Her articles have been featured in several homeschool publications and she regularly speaks to homeschool groups throughout Southern California. Contact her at www.toolsforthehomeeducator.com, www.facebook.com/toolsforthehomeeducator, or Penny@ToolsForTheHomeEducator.com.

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