

# College Options and Prep for Home-Educating Families in Pennsylvania

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## I. Intro

It takes a lot of work to prepare for college. Certain schools have certain standards, and high school students must prove they can live up to those standards. Then of course there's the issues of choosing which college to attend, and what major to declare. But not to worry. For every step in the process, there is an experienced guidance counselor who is able to help in such things. Except, what happens when you're home schooled, and no such guidance counselor is available? What does one do then? There are three main places a home educated student can turn to to aid him or her on his or her journey into the adult world, Home school co-ops, programs provided by the various local school districts, and programs offered by local community colleges.

## II. Co-op

A home school Co-op is a gathering of parents who have come together specifically for the purpose of educating junior and senior high school level students. The larger, more formal institutions tend to include a broader variety of children than that, but the focus is still on the older students. Usually meeting once a week, these co-ops seek to provide students with the necessary courses required by PA state law, while letting teens socialize with other teens in a healthy environment.

### a. Teachers

Of course, the teachers are the parents, but instead of one parent teaching their own children, classrooms are set up and parents will teach subjects they feel comfortable with. This provides two important functions. First, it gives parents who are particularly knowledgeable in one or the other subject to share their knowledge with a group that extends beyond their own family. Second, for those parents who struggle with certain subjects, and dread teaching their teens, or don't have the time to invest in relearning it to teach their kids, these parents know they can choose a class at co-op to place their children in, and feel confident that they will have learned the material by the end of the school year.

This is not to say that such parents take their hands completely off of their children's education in these areas, but that rather, whilst the primary source of education comes from somewhere else, as parents, they are still behind their children every step of the way, making sure their work is done each week, grading projects here and there, and helping their teenager with their homework.

### b. Curriculum

Now I mentioned a moment ago that most home school co-ops in this area strive to offer courses that meet the basic requirements that home school students need to meet Pennsylvania's standards. These are, and I quote, from the law applicable to home schoolers: *English, to include language, literature, speech and composition; science, to include biology and chemistry; geography; social studies, to include civics, economics, world history, history of the United States and Pennsylvania; a foreign language; mathematics, to include general mathematics and statistics, algebra and geometry; art; music; physical education; health and physiology; and safety education, including regular and continuous instruction in the dangers and prevention of fires.* This part of the law can be found at **mdhsa-pa.org**. MDHSA stands for Mason Dixon Home Schoolers Association, and is the home school group that my family belongs to, and we attended a co-op run by this group.

Besides all the subject requirements, students must also study these subjects for a number of years if they wish to graduate. As I remember it, it is something along the lines of three years of math and sciences, and four years of English. There are more subjects of course with a varying number of

years. To note here, students only have to take the minimum required amount of years to graduate, but many students do go above and beyond, and whatever academic distinctions they receive is noted on both the transcript and the diploma of the student. **(Pic of Diploma)**

To add to the regular subjects taught that I mentioned above, many co-ops also include classes specifically to do with college prep, and I still remember the class I took. It covered taking good notes, paying proper attention, and helpful study habits that could be effectively utilized in college. The teacher had us practice various different methods that were mentioned, so that we could choose whichever one we then felt comfortable with.

## 1. SAT

Speaking of college prep classes, just as there are SAT prep classes for public school student, so too are there for home educated high school aged teens. I myself did not attend one, but my younger brother did. They are pretty important not just to teach kids how to take the test, but considering as quite a few home schooled children have never been inside a high school before, for home schoolers, the SAT prep also focuses on teaching students how to take a standardized test in a completely alien environment. Different prep groups study differently of course, but the group my brother studied with met once a week, and was composed of home educated students in the Harrisburg, Mechanicsburg and Camp Hill area. They studied Math and English, practiced writing essays and had mini mock tests throughout the school year, before holding a full length mock test at the end of the school year. As an aside, SAT prep really does work; my brother raised his score from below average to just above it.

Once a student has been prepared for the SAT, this also then prepares them for other such tests they will encounter in the near future, such as college placement tests that often resemble the SAT's. For the home school student, SAT prep not only prepares the student to successfully pass the SAT's, but because students are studying with other likeminded students, and by that I mean that most of those kids want to move on to college, this can be a healthy environment to encourage those students who are not sure if they want to pursue higher education after high school – that is, SAT prep for home schoolers provides more than academic goals, fostering a healthy social environment as well.

## III. Local Schools

Now depending on where one lives in Pennsylvania, the school districts can be friendly or not to home educated students. Adams County school districts generally are amicable, with the exception of Gettysburg high, which home school families in the area have had issues with. Where I live, in Littlestown, the school district is exceedingly friendly and makes all sorts of things available to home schoolers, including the textbooks they are using that school year.

### a. Sports Programs

One of the nicest aspects about Littlestown school district is that they let home schooled children within the district play on the school's sports team. While this is good news for parents who want their children to learn an organized sport, it is even better news for those children who want to pursue a career in athletics. If they start young, they can play on the sports team throughout their high school years, competing in all the meets and events with the public school students, and be able to earn a college sports scholarship if they ply well enough. With many home schooling families able to keep a fairly flexible schedule, home educated students are able to pursue sports, without having to worry about their grades slipping. **(Pic of Alan)**

## b. Other Programs

The high schools also have other programs that help guide a student into independence, such as their drivers ed. programs, and New Oxford, Littlestown and Gettysburg all offer programs that home schoolers within their districts can take advantage of.

## IV. Local College Programs

### a. School oriented

Whilst the high schools focus more on programs that help students prepare to enter college, they have also partnered with local community colleges to provide classes with college credits to ambitious students. In Littlestown, this means once a teen is enrolled in the program that is linked with HACC, they go to the high school, and from there are bused to the place where the classes are taught. I know a girl who attends Littlestown high who is enrolled in the criminal justice program that is offered, and speaks very highly of both the academic and real world experience aspects of the course, and plans to resume the course in her senior year and gain a certificate. The great thing about these classes is that it gives students the opportunity to apply for a job directly after high school, whether they want to save for college, or to just enjoy jumping directly into the work force.

### b. Student Oriented

Whilst home school students can and do take advantage of such programs, some opt rather to supplement their high school education. That is, instead of learning English from a co-op, they instead take English 101 at the local college, or college level Math courses, while still studying other high school subjects. This provides three main functions. First, the student learns what it's like to attend college level classes which helps ease them into the college mind-frame. Secondly, it helps parents who may feel that their children need a greater academic push than they can provide, and thirdly, especially during a teen's senior year, when most of their requirements have been met, it allows a student to take a year's worth of college credits while still in high school, so that when they are ready to attend college, they only have to go for three years instead of four. On a side note, this saves a lot of money. College programs are often cheaper if taken while the student is in high school.

One creative approach that my mother used during my high school years was to audit classes. I particularly remember that she obtained permission to audit an African history class at Gettysburg college. We went every Thursday at 8:00am – we couldn't go Tuesday morning, that was when we went to co-op – and sat in on the class. Mom made us take notes, and even bought the book being used by the class, for my siblings and I to share. **(Pic of Baba Tun De Lea)** So even though the course wasn't strictly being offered to high school students, Mom took advantage of the fact that anyone can audit college courses.

## V. Conclusion

So to wit, high school students who go to college take such an venture very seriously, taking full advantage of academic and sports programs offered by the local community colleges and their school districts, and study hard during the high school years, whether they are meeting the requirements set by PA legislature, or taking SAT prep classes. Either way, high school students who are home schooled do just as much or even more than their public school counterparts to prepare themselves for college and the adult world with the many resources that are available to them.

Thank you.