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Homeschoolers and Public Libraries: *A Synergistic Relationship*

By Cynthia Jennings

In 2010, a study done by the national Home Education Research Institute reported that an estimated 2.04 million American children were schooled at home, with a projected growth rate of two to eight percent each year (Ray 2011). The 2012 statistics indicate 49.8 million children are enrolled in American public schools; therefore, potentially more than four percent of children are homeschooled. These families inherently understand the fundamental role a public library plays within their community. As a former home educator myself, and director of the Old Town Public Library, I have experienced first-hand how libraries and homeschoolers work together in a creative, productive, highly innovative, and mutually beneficial manner.

Homeschoolers are commonly heavy users of their local libraries. Statistics show that more than 78 percent of home educators use the public library as their primary resource for curriculum supported materials (Princiotta and Bielick 2006). Often relying on a single income for one parent to be the primary educator, these families typically operate on a shoestring. Defying the great “socialization” myth, homeschooling families are far from insulated from the world. They spend many hours in their communities, and they are definitely in our libraries. In Old Town we see homeschoolers walking through our doors on a weekly, if not daily, basis, to take full advantage of the library’s collections, programming, and meeting spaces.

So, how do libraries become educational “hubs” for homeschoolers? They develop programs and services to support this burgeoning population by

- Offering science fairs, spelling bees, book clubs, specialized story hours, technology workshops, tours and scavenger hunts to explore the library’s resources
- Connecting homeschooling families with local experts and offering meeting spaces for music, science, and art classes
- Tailoring programming to serve children of varying ages, as homeschoolers are not tied to age-specific activities
- Using local homeschooling discussion lists to better inform librarians about trends and resources; and, as a venue to promote library services
- Providing links on the library’s web site to state law guidelines, testing information, homeschooling publishers, government resources, homeschooling listservs, homework help sites, and legal information
- Considering homeschoolers’ needs when creating policy for loan periods, item limits, fines and fees, meeting spaces, and purchasing to support curriculum
- Promoting community-wide recognition for student work through displays, art shows, or project fairs
- Developing annual events that enable families to share ideas, review/sell curriculum, supplies, educational materials, and perform portfolio reviews.

Homeschoolers are resourceful, independent, insightful, and energetic library patrons who in their own way have much to offer their public library. While some may argue that home-educated children save American taxpayers upwards of \$16 billion by not attending publicly funded schools, I would remind home educators that their tax dollars do support municipal budgets, through which many public

libraries are funded. Their advocacy is crucial in urging lawmakers to support these vital institutions in their communities. Libraries also rely on homeschooling families to

- Serve on friends groups and/or library boards
- Volunteer regularly to help with daily library functions or special programming
- Be instrumental in helping with strategic planning and library advocacy
- Help arrange for, and facilitate, programming specifically designed for homeschoolers
- Assist in writing state and federal grants to fund programs and purchase materials

As a former home educator, I am certain it would have been impossible to educate my children without the wealth of resources available at our public library. As a public library director, I believe the energy and vibrant curiosity that home-educated children have, and the commitment and support their parents contribute, make libraries a better place for all. 🐟



Cynthia Jennings is the director of the Old Town Public Library. She helped found the HOOT (Homeschoolers of Old Town) homeschooling group in 2007 and has been a staunch supporter of their activities at the library and within the community.

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