



Guide to Homeschooling in Massachusetts

Massachusetts Home Learning Association



Table of Contents

What is the Massachusetts Home Learning Association (MHLA)?	1
Is home education for me?	2
What about "socialization"?	2
What about special needs and interests?	3
I'm not certified to teach! How will I be able to handle it?	4
How will my children learn what I don't know?	4
How much does it cost? Can I afford home education?	4
What about, college, work and "the real world"?	5
What if I don't have the support of my family and friends?	5
How does homeschooling work in everyday life?	5
Do homeschoolers take the MCAS?	6
What do I need to begin?	7
Home Education Support Groups	9
MHLA Regional Contacts	9

As an all-volunteer organization, we depend on your donations to continue our work of protecting homeschooling by providing accurate information to school officials and the general public, and supporting and encouraging communication among Massachusetts homeschoolers. Our outreach expenses include our website, copying, postage, advertising, telephones and our post office box.

www.mhla.org

© 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004 Massachusetts Home Learning Association

What is the Massachusetts Home Learning Association (MHLA)?

MHLA Mission to Protect and Promote Home Education

Massachusetts Home Learning Association, founded in 1987, is an all-volunteer organization with a mission to protect and promote home education as a valid educational choice for families in the Commonwealth. To that end we:

- Educate regulators, the media, and the public about homeschooling in Massachusetts, which is legally protected through the guidelines set down in the Charles and Brunelle cases.
- Inform homeschoolers of potential developments in the legal status of homeschooling in Massachusetts. To ensure that we have accurate information, we keep abreast of local, state, and national issues and maintain good working relations with other homeschool organizations.
- Advocate, when appropriate, for policies that improve the climate for homeschooling in the state.
- Connect homeschoolers with each other through our online network, support group listings and regional contacts.

We represent no particular religious viewpoint or political party. To achieve our mission, we draw on the expertise of both active and veteran homeschoolers and rely on the informed support of the diverse community of homeschoolers across the Commonwealth.

MHLA Services for Homeschoolers

→ Internet Services

1. Comprehensive website for Massachusetts homeschoolers, including a listing of support groups in Massachusetts.

www.mhla.org

2. The MHLA Yahoo egroup is a great way to communicate with homeschoolers from around the state and to connect with like-minded people in your own geographic area. You'll find interesting discussion on such topics as computer resources, special needs, learning styles, developing patience, dealing with reluctant learners, testing, and books on homeschooling. Follow instructions on our website or join the egroup by sending email to masshomelearningassoc-subscribe@yahoo.com.

3. The free monthly MHLA Update, sent via email, is an ideal way to keep informed about any issues affecting homeschoolers in Massachusetts. It is published once a month, or more often if events warrant it. To subscribe, follow instructions on our website or send an email message to subscribe@mhla.org.

→ Personal Services

We maintain a list of Regional Contacts who are experienced homeschoolers ready to help get you started. You are likely to find many of the answers to your questions on our website and in this booklet, so we ask that you read through them before contacting us. Please remember that we are an all-volunteer organization; no one is sitting by a phone in an office. But we will be more than happy to return your call as soon as possible. We're pleased you are thinking about homeschooling in Massachusetts.

Is home education for me?

There are myriad reasons parents choose options other than school: political, religious or educational reasons. Sometimes people start homeschooling for one reason, and continue for others they hadn't even thought of when they started. Some people homeschool because they think that home education is the best way to instill their own values in their children, some because they think home education provides a superior education, some because they simply enjoy being with their children and want to continue close family relationships. While there is tremendous variety among home educators, we all agree that home education is a desirable alternative for our children. Retaining our right to educate our children as we see fit is of utmost importance.

Most families find that they derive tremendous benefit from being part of a homeschool support group. And if you don't click with the home educating families you first contact, try, try again! Chances are you will be able to find other home educators who share your philosophy, concerns and interests. MHLA provides numerous ways for you to start networking with other homeschoolers, through our support group listing, our regional and town contact system, and our egroup community.

Numerous books and resources exist to help you decide about homeschooling. You'll find the ones that speak to you.

What about "socialization"?

The word "socialization" means different things to different people in different contexts. You will find that, as a homeschooler, you will be asked this question frequently. The concept that public school is the "glue" of our society is a theory that is firmly entrenched. Despite its clear inadequacies and much contradictory evidence, the theory is still defended vigorously in some quarters.

For a wealth of advice from other homeschoolers, visit www.nhen.org, the National Home Education Network, and click to "New Homeschoolers."

Some Favorite Books

- And What About College by Cafi Cohen
- Beginner's Guide to Homeschooling by Pat Farenga
- A Charlotte Mason Companion by Karen Andreola
- Dumbing Us Down by John Taylor Gatto
- Family Matters by David Guterson
- The Homeschooling Book of Answers by Linda Dobson, ed.
- The Homeschooling Handbook by Mary Griffith
- How Children Learn by John Holt
- Learning All the Time by John Holt
- Playful Learning by Anne Engelhardt and Cheryl Sullivan
- Teach Your Own by John Holt
- The Teenage Liberation Handbook by Grace Llewellyn
- The Unschooling Handbook by Mary Griffith
- The Well-Trained Mind by Jessie Wise and Susan Wise Bauer

Here's how one parent responded in a letter to the editor:

As to the favorite bugaboo, "socialization," I am always mystified by the claim that the school experience is important for learning how to relate to other people.

A quick glance through a newspaper will reveal any number of acts of unkindness, intolerance, or violence committed daily by adults [and younger people] who have had the vaunted benefits of school "socialization."

**Some group activities that
homeschoolers can organize themselves:**

bands
book/game/puzzle swaps
camping trips
career fairs
child-published newspapers
craft fairs
hanging out at the beach
history and science fairs
indoor gym play
knitting/sewing clubs
math clubs
Not-Back-to-School Picnics
outdoor play groups:
 Capture-the-Flag
 Ultimate Frisbee
pet clubs
playground hopping
potluck suppers
singing groups
skate swaps
softball
talent shows
theatre groups
track and field days
Valentine exchanges
writing groups

Some have researched this issue and found that (as experienced homeschoolers can tell you) "homeschool families are providing adequately for socialization needs." One investigation looked at the commonly held assumption that public school education 'socializes' students:

The subjects were 33 demographically matched school-age children, 13 of whom attend public school, 20 of whom are educated primarily by their parents... After the data were processed...they indicated that the home educated children in this sample were significantly better socialized and more mature than those in public school. The immediate implication is that home school families are

providing adequately for socialization needs. The broadest implication is that we may need to reexamine the assumed basis of the socialization process.

(Thomas Smedley, Socialization of Home School Children — A Communication Approach. Radford University, Radford, VA, 1992)

Most people want their children to have opportunities to be with other people. Ironically, in some schools the chance to interact freely with other children is limited to recess and lunch, while true socializing is discouraged!

In addition to group activities with other homeschoolers, our children participate in town sports programs, scout groups, religious groups, music lessons, dance classes and many other activities. They have friendships with other home learners and people in their communities, just as they would if they attended a private school.

Again, talk to parents. Most will say finding social contacts is not a problem, and they may have helpful suggestions for how to get hooked into the network.

What about special needs and interests?

Perhaps more than any other single alternative, home education broadens our options and extends opportunities to accommodate learning differences. You and your family may be relieved to discover that limits encountered in a school setting can be overcome in the broader community. In homeschooling, we are not limited by any externally imposed methods of evaluating, forecasting, labeling or treating particular "abilities" or "disabilities." The family can respond to the changing circumstances of each child's growth. Home education allows direct pursuit of varied, creative ways of learning, while any and all resources used become part of the overall home education program. Families are generally pleased when labels and other restrictions are removed and children learn in the environment of home and community.

I'm not certified to teach! How will I be able to handle it?

At first you may be apprehensive about your ability to teach. Most new homeschoolers are. The most important thing to keep in mind is that your child is very qualified to learn. Children learn an immense amount from birth through the first three years of life. Your children's innate ability to learn from parents, siblings, and the world at large is evidenced by their many skills to date, physical, mental and emotional. There is no reason to assume that their learning patterns will change; academic skills are not different from the other things your children have learned. If you watch your children, you will find the best ways to cooperate with this ongoing process. Consider all the "real life" learning that is available to you.

How will my children learn what I don't know?

As homeschooling parents, we can testify to the many areas in which our children's knowledge far surpasses our own. Then again, as homeschooling parents, we might welcome the opportunity to learn (or relearn) new academic subjects. There is a wealth of materials available for individual learners, in all subject areas.

Homeschoolers are a great source of information about which materials are most successful. Asking other homeschoolers about various curricula and experimenting on your own is the best way to find out what works well for your children. Allow yourself much room for trial and error; the flexibility that we have as homeschoolers is something that many a classroom teacher would envy!

Your child can receive a high quality, personally-designed education. A child's own inquiries can be supplemented by private lessons, apprenticeships, distance learning courses, part-

time jobs, volunteering, and hobbies. Many things can help to fill the gap between the parent's knowledge and what the child is eager to learn. Some children attend public schools part-time for specific classes and activities such as band, chemistry, art, science or languages. Many a science, math, art, music or language teacher would love to have an interested and enthusiastic private pupil. If payment is a problem, perhaps gardening, yard work, babysitting or some other service can be traded for lessons. As well, many homeschooling parents are delighted to share their expertise or interest in various fields with children other than their own. In recent years, homeschoolers have become numerous enough to represent a market. Taking advantage of this, community colleges, museums, and other learning centers

have started reaching out, designing courses to attract homeschoolers, and in some cases even working with home educators to create "designer" courses which are tailored to the needs and desires of the homeschooling clientele.

How much does it cost? Can I afford home education?

Home education can cost as much or as little as you want it to. Indeed, it is overwhelming to consider all the materials available in the marketplace! Chances are you have more than enough to get started.

Be conservative in your purchases at first; watch your children carefully. Many families have found that materials purchased specifically for their "educational" value gather dust on the shelves, while money invested in the areas of a child's interests proves to be

the best value.

A child's curiosity and interest, with time spent alone and with others, are home education's most precious commodities. Single-parent or double-income families have found creative ways to balance child care, work, play and

Community Resources & Materials, often free

Good old-fashioned playing aka "child's work"
4-H, Camp Fire
Aquariums
Backyard excursions
Ballet
Camping
Circus
Community art centers, colleges, theatre groups, etc.
Farms and orchards (fruit and flower picking)
Gardens
Hiking
Internet
Local libraries (books, audiotapes, videos, special programs, public space and helpful librarians)
Museums (art, science, etc.)
National, state and local parks and historical sites
Nature sanctuaries
NPR
Orienteering
PBS
Travel
Volunteering

learning without forfeiting home education. Often families work together to accomplish this. Other home learners, family, friends, neighbors and community resources are all available to you.

What about, college, work and "the real world"?

.....

Home educated children are free to learn in the broader community where they and their families live, work and play. Their contacts include people of all ages, interests and professions. Some families never send their children to school at all and others have successfully switched to home education after years in public or private schools. A change from school to home education or vice versa can be made at any age or grade level, right through high school. Home educated children (whether they have learned with or without formal academics) regularly enter schools, colleges, and the work force with ease and a minimum of adjustment.

Karl Bunday maintains a continually growing list of hundreds of colleges that have admitted homeschoolers. See his website <http://learninfreedom.org/>.

In an article on *Parent Soup* (parentsoup.com), Bruce Hammond writes of home learners getting accepted to colleges: "Being different is often an advantage in college admissions because most schools attempt to assemble a class with the widest possible range of backgrounds and experiences. Any student who can speak convincingly about his or her history is sure to impress an admissions officer."

Even the website of the College Board, www.collegeboard.org, has a special page outlining the path from home to college. They note that while home learners may face special challenges when applying to college, this is not a handicap to success. In fact, "...many home schoolers are already self-motivated learners, a characteristic necessary for success in college." Linda Dobson's Book Homeschoolers' Success Stories chronicles what some modern day homeschoolers are doing "after homeschooling." The group she details consists of a professional writer, a visual artist, a professional athlete, an

Olympic athlete, a member of the armed services, a personal chef, a professional actress, a building contractor, a counselor, a police officer, a music teacher, and a fire fighter. Some chose to include college as part of their education, others chose a different path. Most are happy and are pursuing lifelong interests. Dobson sees as the common thread through these grown homeschoolers their individuality and self-reliance.

What if I don't have the support of my family and friends?

.....

If you decide not to send your children to school, you will meet people who either do not understand what you are trying to do, or who simply disagree strongly with your decision. Most of us get support and information from other home educating families. Tell them about the opposition you are facing; they may be able to help you gain a new perspective.

Books are helpful in this regard too. John Holt devotes an entire chapter to the question of "Common Objections to Homeschooling" in his book, Teach Your Own. We include on page 2-3 a list of a few of the many books that have helped us. Read some of them. You will probably find many of your questions answered, and food for thought as well!

Homeschooling is becoming more common and accepted every day. Most people you meet will already know someone, a cousin, a friend, or a coworker, who home educates. Usually, the response to finding out that your kids learn at home is a positive one, such as "That's great!" or, directed at your child, a telling "You're so lucky!"

How does homeschooling work in everyday life?

.....

It is important to realize that there are many different approaches to learning. Some families operate without a specific pre-selected curriculum, school books or scheduled activities. Other parents set up a "school at home" with

classroom areas, a pre-set curriculum and a fairly strict schedule. Of course, there are many variations in between.

Get to know other families who learn at home. Ask questions, and observe how they do things. As you expose yourself to different approaches, you will find that you naturally lean in a particular

Ideas for real people and places to visit:

- *animal shelters
- *airports
- *bakeries
- *band practice
- *beekeeper
- *bus/train trips
- *boat rides
- *baseball
- *park
- barber shop*
- car wash*
- cleaners*
- dime store*
- doctor's/dentist's office*
- duck pond*
- fire station*
- *fishing
- *florist
- *grocery store
- *ice skating
- *knife sharpener's
- *nursing
- optometrist*
- police department*
- post office*
- restaurants*
- skyscrapers*
- veterinarian*
- *weather station
- *x-ray lab
- *zoo

direction. Perhaps one family's system seems awkward or foreign to you, but another feels comfortable and familiar. As you read, observe, and experiment within your own family, your educational philosophy will become clearer.

Many parents begin their program with a specific curriculum to ensure that the "academics" are being covered. For some families these systems work fine and they continue to use them. Others find that academics are learned with no formal lessons, and that strict adherence to any pre-set curriculum is unnecessary. Some develop a "hybrid" approach, moving freely between formal and informal methods as goals and interests dictate. A standardized curriculum can be frustrating when there is a discrepancy between the goals of the curriculum and the child's own learning patterns. In the historic tradition of scholarship, many families use the interests of the child as their only curriculum. They often describe themselves as "unschoolers" in their approach.

All of these approaches produce competent and educated citizens, and children learn happily in many different ways. Remember, if one approach does not seem to be working for you and your child, look for other ways that may work better. One of the greatest advantages home learners have is flexibility, along with the time, motivation and opportunity to observe our children.

Do homeschoolers take the MCAS?

No. The frameworks that are tested by the MCAS are the curriculum for the public school. As the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision, *Charles*, has indicated, parents can be required to provide instruction in the subjects required by Massachusetts General Laws c 71 sec 1, but there is no set sequence of instruction that must be followed. The superintendent may not "dictate the manner in which the subjects will be taught. This would involve the school authorities in an activity beyond the legitimate scope of the State Interest involved." *Charles* at 339

The passage of the Massachusetts Education Reform Act of 1993 did not affect the assessment guidelines that *Charles* established. The Department of Education confirms that homeschooled students "are not required nor entitled by law to participate in MCAS."

What do I need to begin?

The right of parents to educate their children at home is protected by Massachusetts statute and case law. General Law c. 76 sec.1 states that attendance at a public school is not required "of...a child who is being otherwise instructed in a manner approved by the superintendent or the school committee..." According to the Supreme Judicial Court, this phrase clearly covers home education. This is not a privilege granted by the school because they like you or approve of your philosophy of education. It is a basic right. (*Charles* p. 599) However, the Court held that the state has an interest in ensuring that the children residing therein receive an education.

Massachusetts statute requires that a home education program be approved before children between the ages of six and sixteen are exempt from school attendance. For six-year-olds, apply before September of the calendar year in which the child turns six. However, you may apply at any time of the year, and need not keep your child in school to finish the term.

The approval process in Massachusetts is rarely difficult, but each district sets its own policy. Experience tells us that school officials are often misinformed about homeschool regulations; therefore it is best to inform yourself fully first. Before presenting your plan, familiarize yourself with the *Care and Protection of Charles* (399 Mass. 324, 1987), and *Brunelle vs. Lynn Public Schools* (SJC-07709, 1998), the entire texts of which are on the MHLA website, www.mhla.org.

Be sure to visit the "Information for Superintendents" section of the website; there we anticipate many of the questions that superintendents might ask. To order a print copy of *Information for Superintendents*, see the information on page 1 of this *Guide*.

After reviewing the Court decisions, contact other home learners in your district (see *MHLA Services* pages 1 and 10) to determine how your local district has dealt with homeschoolers. Then contact your local school district and inform them of your intent to educate at home by sending a letter, return receipt requested. The response you receive will depend on your district; some districts never reply, others will

ask for your educational plan. The district's requirements must be aligned with the *Charles* and *Brunelle* Court decisions.

Brunelle makes it clear that any conditions for approval of education proposals must be "essential" for evaluating the education of the child.

From the Supreme Judicial Court Decision in the Brunelle Case (1998)

The nature of the home education involved in the plaintiffs' case (namely, parents teaching their children in their own home) ... in certain important ways can never be the equivalent of in-school education. For example, at home, there are no other students (except perhaps siblings), no classrooms, and no rigid schedules. Parents who teach at home stand in a very different relationship to their children than do teachers to a class full of other peoples' children. Teaching methods may be less formalized, but in the home setting may be more effective than those used in the classroom because the teacher-to-student ratio is maximized, a factor permitting close communication and monitoring on an individualized basis...

While following a schedule may be an important consideration in a public school where preexisting schedules need to be maintained and coordinated, the perception and use of time in a home school are different. The plaintiffs can observe and accommodate variations (from child to child, subject to subject, day to day) in the learning process and teach through a process that paces each student.

Brunelle at 517-518

Charles allows, but does not require, school officials to ask parents to provide:

1. **Information about the parent's academic credentials or other qualifications.** Teacher certification or college degrees are not necessary to teach your own children in Massachusetts.
2. **A brief description of the proposed educational plan.** Include in your presentation a list of subjects you intend to cover. While parents must cover the subjects mandated by General Law c. 72 sec. 1, 2 & 3 and also other subjects considered expedient by the school committee (*Charles*, p. 601), the Court has said that the school may not "dictate the manner in which the subjects will be taught." Its purpose is "only to determine the type of subject to be taught and the grade level of the instruction for comparison purposes with the curriculum of the public schools." (*Charles* p. 602).
3. **Access to the kind of educational materials the parent expects to use.** *Brunelle* p. 518 observes that "some of the most effective curricular materials that the plaintiffs may use may not be tangible. For example, travel, community service, visits to educationally enriching facilities and places, and meeting with various resource people, can provide important learning experiences apart from the four corners of a text or workbook."
4. **Agreement on no more than one kind of periodic reporting or evaluation.** The Court said that the school "may properly require periodic standardized testing of the children to ensure educational progress and the attainment of minimum standards." However, the Court also said that "other means of evaluating the progress of the children may be substituted...such as periodic progress reports or dated work samples." If you do not want to test but school officials request it, be aware of other alternatives allowed by the Court and try to negotiate an acceptable alternative. Some families periodically submit a brief verbal or written statement that their program has continued to be effective. Others use a simple log or listing of the child's learning areas, which they either submit on a regular basis or send upon request. A portfolio or work samples are sometimes used.

Should approval be denied at any point, the burden of proof shifts to school officials to show "that the instruction in the homeschool proposal fails to equal in thoroughness and efficiency, and in the progress made therein, that in the public school in the same town..."

The information in this booklet does not constitute legal advice; it is provided for informational purposes only.

Home Education Support Groups and Other Support for Massachusetts Homeschoolers

Home Education Support Groups

MHLA maintains a list of support groups throughout the state. To view the most up-to-date listings, go to our website at <http://mhla.org/support/index.htm>

Some Organizations Serving Massachusetts Homeschoolers

Family Resource Center (FRC)

<http://frc.info/>

Provides a wide variety of services, featuring educational field trips and programs for homeschoolers in CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, and VT. From their website: *"The Family Resource Center was established in 1994. The FRC is a unique organization based in Massachusetts, servicing New England homeschooling families by identifying and accessing creative and challenging educational resources that enrich children's lives and support their educational interests. We are not a support group."*

North Star: Self-directed Learning for Teens

<http://www.northstar teens.org/>

From their website: "Self-directed Learning for Teens: Supporting unschooling teens and their families since 1995."

Voyagers --A homeschool resource center and cooperative

<http://voyagersinc.org>

From their website: *"Voyagers, Inc. is an all-volunteer, non-profit organization that seeks to provide resources and a sense of community to support homeschooling families in Eastern Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire...Study groups, clubs, and activities are offered..."*

John Holt/Growing Without Schooling (GWS)

<http://www.holtgws.com>

John Holt and his legacy, including Patrick Farenga's books and Unschooling Workshops.

MHLA Regional Contacts

You are likely to find many of the answers to your questions on our website, www.mhla.org, so we ask that you read through it (at home, a friend's house or public library) before contacting us. Please remember that we are an all-volunteer organization; no one is sitting by a phone in an office. But we will be more than happy to return your call as soon as possible. We're pleased you are thinking about home education in Massachusetts!

To find the current list of Regional Contacts, please go to our website and click on "Got a Question?" Or go directly to: <http://mhla.org/questions.htm>.

www.mhla.org