

Homeschooling: Our Fastest-Growing Alternative in K-12 Education



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In a homeschooling environment, the teacher need not be certified, but the child MUST learn. In a public school environment, the teacher MUST be certified, but the child need NOT learn.

– Gene Royer, educational consultant

As recently as one generation ago, most parents considered just two main options when planning for their children’s education – public or private school. For all but a very few students, primary and secondary education was synonymous with enrolling in a school outside the home. Compulsory school attendance laws in most states discouraged homeschooling, and “distance learning” was limited to written correspondence courses.

This situation began to change in the early 1980s, as a growing number of parents, encouraged by the work of educational theorists like John Holt and Raymond and Dorothy Moore, asserted their rights to direct the education of their children. The first magazine for American homeschoolers, *Growing Without Schooling*, appeared in 1977. Six years later, the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) was established to protect homeschoolers against legal challenges and to lobby for the formal recognition of homeschooling in all 50 states.

The Home Educators Association of Virginia (HEAV) likewise coalesced in 1983, providing a first unified voice for homeschoolers throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. HEAV lobbied successfully for the passage of Virginia’s homeschool statute in 1984, and the association is still active today. Homeschooling is now legal throughout the United States, although policies and procedures vary considerably from place to place. Today’s legal controversies do not concern the basic right of parents to educate their children at home (that is now settled law and practice), but rather the degree to which homeschooled children ought have access to public school services or be able to participate on public school sports teams.

The rise of the homeschooling movement has many contributing factors. Author Milton Gaither points to the influence of countercultural movements on both the left and right side of the ideological spectrum, suburbanization and the American “cult of the child” (“Homeschool: An American History,” Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

In the last 15 years, the Internet has given homeschooling a significant boost. Innumerable resources are now freely available online to home educators and students – lesson plans, curricula and informational websites of all kinds, as well as discussion forums and support groups that help connect homeschoolers over long or short distances. As a supplement to their parent-directed education, a growing number of homeschooled students now enroll directly in courses that are offered by a wide array of virtual academies. Upper-level students regularly complete advanced coursework or earn early college credits online while learning from home.

In this chapter, we’ll take a closer look at homeschooling throughout Hampton Roads. We’ll examine why homeschooling has become the fastest-growing segment of K-12 education and we’ll explore the legal framework for home education in the Commonwealth. We’ll identify the institutions and other

groups in our region that support home education. Finally, we'll see how well homeschoolers fare compared to students at traditional K-12 schools.

Who Homeschools And Why?

The homeschooling movement has taken off by leaps and bounds in the past generation. **The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that about 1.5 million, or 2.9 percent, of all school-age children were homeschooled in 2007 – a 36 percent increase since 2003 and a 74 percent increase since 1999 (National Center for Education Statistics, “The Condition of Education 2009”).**

As reporting requirements vary widely from state to state, however, the precise number of homeschooled students is difficult to determine and Virginia reported only 2 percent of school-aged children as being homeschooled in 2010-11 (see Graph 2). Some homeschool advocates suggest that official statistics underestimate the true number of homeschoolers, some of whom may decline to represent themselves as such to public authorities. The Commonwealth of Virginia requires all homeschool families, with the exception of those who have obtained religious exemption, to submit an annual notice of intent.

Statistics from the Virginia Department of Education reveal a consistent pattern of growth in the number of homeschooled students, at both the state and regional level. **As Table 1 indicates, the Virginia Department of Education identified 31,978 homeschooled students throughout the Commonwealth and 5,245 in Hampton Roads in the 2010-11 school year.** These figures represent approximately 2 percent of the school-age population (see Graph 2). In real numbers, Chesapeake and Virginia Beach boast the greatest number of homeschoolers in our region (see Graph 1). As a percentage of the total school-age population, rural localities like Gloucester, Surry and Southampton Counties stand out for their comparatively high proportion of students educated at home (see Graph 2).

National survey data suggest that the “typical” homeschool family is a white, two-parent household with three or more children (see Table 2). However, as the number of homeschool families has grown, so too has their diversity.

Conservative Christians were a key constituency of the homeschool movement from the very beginning, and “a desire to provide religious or moral instruction” remains the single most important motivation cited by parents who homeschool, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (see Table 3). Many of the oldest homeschool organizations (including both HLSDA and HEAV) are Christian-based. Since the 1990s, more secular groups, like the Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers, have coalesced in order to represent homeschoolers from different cultural and religious backgrounds.

The changing face of home education received some attention earlier this year when a Newsweek cover story (“Why Urban, Educated Parents Are Turning to DIY Education,” Jan. 30, 2012) depicted homeschooling as a newly fashionable trend among urban elites. **Motivations for these new homeschoolers include frustration with public schools’ emphasis on standardized testing and perceptions of a narrow definition of academic achievement, as well as parents’ “desire to craft an education just right for each child.”¹ Still other parents have turned to homeschooling as a means of addressing their children’s autism, ADHD or other special needs.** Cherrie Moore, owner of the Virginia Beach homeschool bookstore Moore Expressions, told us that she has seen an uptick in parents who have begun homeschooling their middle school- and high school-aged children in response to problems with bullying and other negative social influences at local schools.

The breadth of Hampton Roads’ homeschool community is immediately evident through the regional listings on the websites of the Home Educators Association of Virginia (www.heav.org) and the Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers (www.vahomeschoolers.org). There are homeschool support groups of all kinds, including specialized groups for African Americans, military families,

¹ <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/01/29/why-urban-educated-parents-are-turning-to-diy-education.html>

radical unschoolers (those who do not believe in any kind of formal, group education) and practitioners of classical Christian education. The consistency offered by home education is particularly appealing to a number of members of our region's military community. Given their families' frequent moves and deployments, several military spouses we spoke with found the role of teaching parent a natural fit.

To sum up: There is no single dominant profile of a homeschooling family in Hampton Roads. The reasons that families in our region choose to homeschool are as diverse as the families themselves. **Many of the teaching parents we spoke with did not necessarily come to homeschooling through firm philosophical or pedagogical convictions, but rather as an option that happened best to fit their family's needs at a particular time.** It's not uncommon for parents to educate one or two of their children at home, while enrolling siblings in a traditional school. Other parents plan to homeschool only for a few years of their children's education. The one commonality we did encounter among our region's homeschoolers is that mothers are almost always the primary teaching parent, with fathers participating in home education in a more supplemental way.



TABLE 1

HOMESCHOOLED STUDENTS AND RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS, 2010-2011

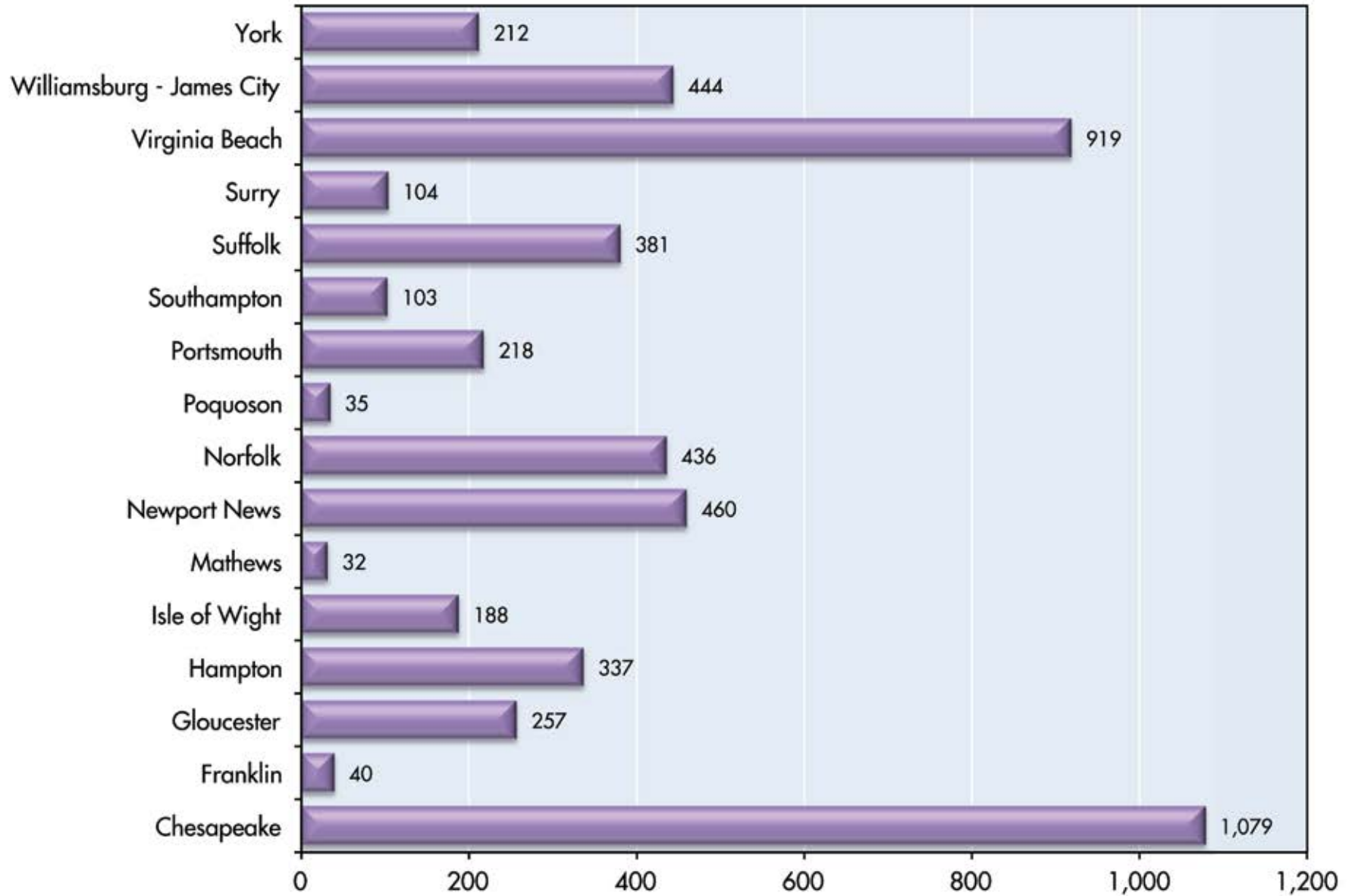
	Home Instruction K-5	Home Instruction 6-8	Home Instruction 9-12	Home Instruction Other	Total Home Instruction	Religious Exemptions K-5	Religious Exemptions 6-8	Religious Exemptions 9-12	Religious Exemptions Other	Total Religious Exemptions
Chesapeake	462	242	218	0	922	122	35	0	0	157
Franklin	14	12	10	0	36	2	1	1	0	4
Gloucester	45	24	61	0	130	32	30	65	0	127
Hampton	135	71	71	2	279	13	22	23	0	58
Isle of Wight	81	31	34	0	146	22	9	11	0	42
Mathews	13	5	9	0	27	4	0	1	0	5
Newport News	246	87	99	0	432	20	4	4	0	28
Norfolk	219	98	101	0	418	10	5	3	0	18
Poquoson	13	11	7	0	31	0	1	3	0	4
Portsmouth	93	51	46	12	202	7	2	7	0	16
Southampton	22	24	33	0	79	6	5	13	0	24
Suffolk	181	75	56	0	312	48	16	5	0	69
Surry	23	26	41	2	92	0	2	9	1	12
Virginia Beach	469	211	221	0	901	13	2	3	0	18
Williamsburg/ James City	172	96	101	0	369	0	0	0	75	75
York	111	55	36	0	202	5	2	3	0	10
Hampton Roads	2,299	1,119	1,234	16	4,578	304	136	151	76	667
Virginia	12,157	5,869	6,008	648	24,682	2,412	1,571	1,997	1,316	7,296

Source: Virginia Department of Education

*Students with a religious exemption are in addition to those students counted as being involved in home instruction.

GRAPH 1

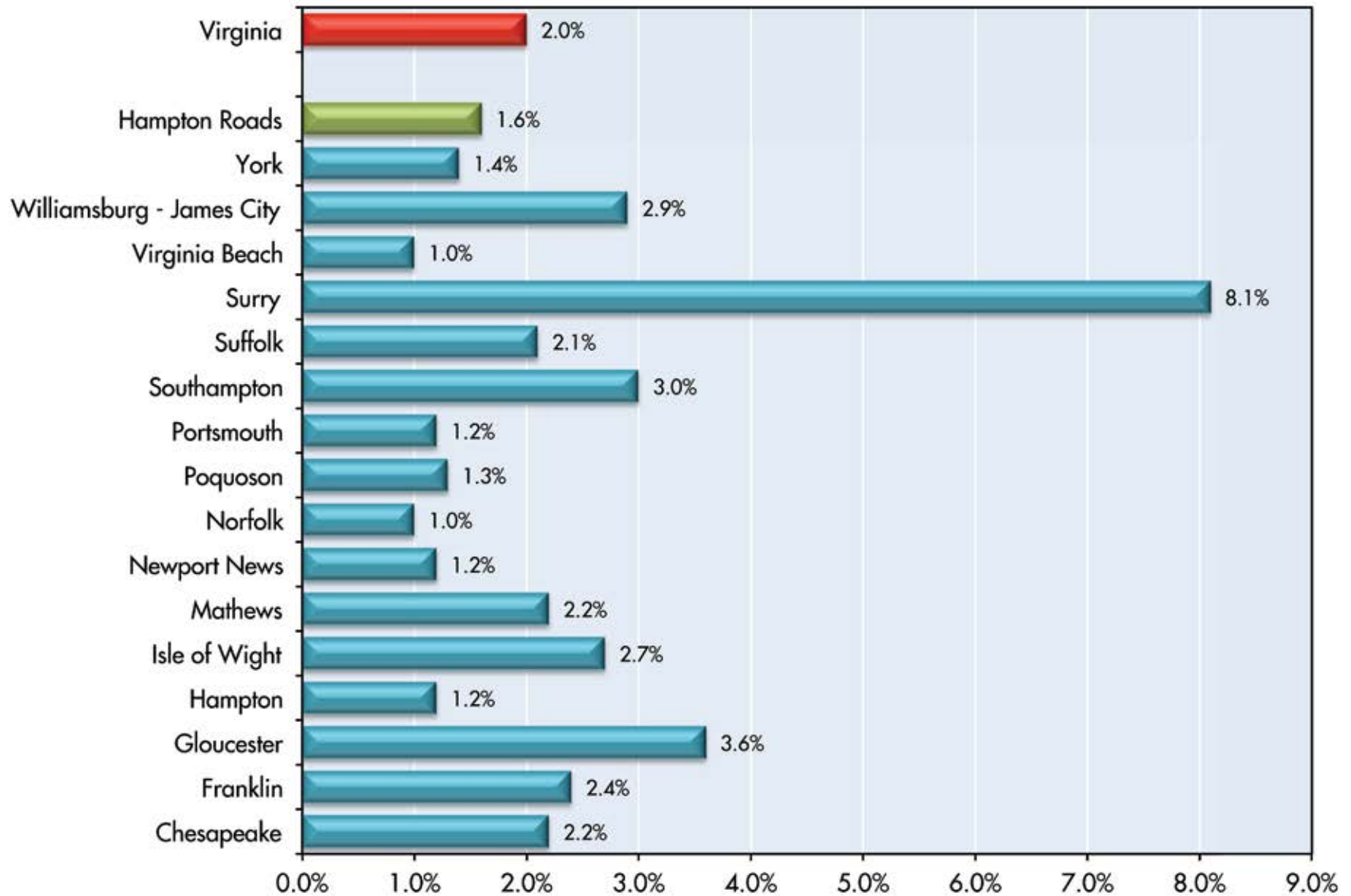
NUMBER OF HOMESCHOOLED STUDENTS IN HAMPTON ROADS BY CITY OR COUNTY, 2010-2011



Source: Virginia Department of Education

GRAPH 2

PERCENTAGE OF HOMESCHOOLED STUDENTS IN HAMPTON ROADS BY CITY OR COUNTY, 2010-2011



Source: Virginia Department of Education

TABLE 2

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF ALL SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN THE U.S. WHO WERE HOMESCHOOLED AND HOMESCHOOLING RATE, BY SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS (2007)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage Distribution	Homeschooling Rate*
Total	1,508,000	100.0%	2.9%
Homeschooled entirely	1,266,000	84.0%	100.0%
Homeschooled and enrolled in school part time	242,000	16.0%	100.0%
Race/ethnicity			
White	1,159,000	76.8%	3.9%
Black	61,000	4.0%	0.8%
Hispanic	147,000	9.8%	1.5%
Other	141,000	9.3%	3.4%
Number of children in the household			
One child	187,000	12.4%	2.2%
Two children	412,000	27.3%	2.0%
Three or more children	909,000	60.3%	4.1%
Number of parents in the household			
Two parents	1,348,000	89.4%	3.6%
One parent	115,000	7.6%	1.0%
Nonparental guardians	45,000	3.0%	2.1%
Parents' participation in the labor force			
Two parents, one in labor force	808,000	53.6%	7.5%
Two parents, both in labor force	509,000	33.8%	2.0%
One parent, in labor force	127,000	8.4%	1.3%
No parent in labor force	64,000	4.3%	1.5%
Household income			
\$25,000 or less	239,000	15.9%	2.1%
\$25,001 - 50,000	364,000	24.1%	3.4%
\$50,001 - 75,000	405,000	26.8%	3.9%

TABLE 2

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF ALL SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN IN THE U.S. WHO WERE HOMESCHOOLED AND HOMESCHOOLING RATE, BY SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS (2007)

Characteristic	Number	Percentage Distribution	Homeschooling Rate*
\$75,001 or more	501,000	33.2%	2.7%
Parents' education			
High school diploma or less	206,000	13.7%	1.4%
Some college or vocational/technical	549,000	36.4%	3.8%
Bachelor's degree	444,000	29.4%	3.9%
Graduate/professional degree	309,000	20.5%	2.9%
* The homeschooling rate is the percentage of the total subgroup that is homeschooled. For example, some 3.6% of all school-age children in two-parent families were homeschooled.			
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/tables/table-hsc-1.asp			

TABLE 3

PERCENTAGE OF SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN WHO WERE HOMESCHOOLED IN THE U.S., BY REASONS PARENTS GAVE AS IMPORTANT AND MOST IMPORTANT FOR HOMESCHOOLING (2007)

Reason	Important*	Most Important
A desire to provide religious or moral instruction	83.3%	35.8%
A concern about environment of other schools (such as safety, drugs or negative peer pressure)	87.6%	20.5%
A dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools	72.7%	17.1%
Other reasons (including family time, finances, travel and distance)	32.2%	14.3%
A desire to provide a nontraditional approach to child's education	65.2%	6.5%
Child has other special needs	20.9%	3.6%
Child has a physical or mental health problem	11.2%	2.1%
* Respondents could choose more than one reason. Percentages are based on a population of 1,508,000 homeschoolers.		
Source: National Center for Education Statistics, at: http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/tables/table-hsc-2.asp		

Homeschool Regulations In Virginia

Who is eligible to homeschool in Virginia? The answer is, nearly all parents, as long as they submit a small amount of paperwork to their local school divisions each year. The Commonwealth provides four options for parents who wish to educate their children at home:

- The teaching parent holds a high school diploma. (Option 1)
- The teaching parent meets the qualifications for a teacher prescribed by the Board of Education. (Option 2)
- The teaching parent provides a program of study or curriculum which may be delivered through a correspondence course or distance learning program, or in any other manner. (Option 3)
- The teaching parent provides evidence that the parent is able to provide an adequate education for the child. (Option 4)

All four options require parents to submit accompanying documentation to their local school division superintendents each year by Aug. 15. The notice of intent to homeschool must also include a description of the curriculum that will be followed in the coming school year, “for information purposes only.” Superintendents are not asked to evaluate or judge the submitted curricula.²

One remaining legal stipulation for Virginia homeschoolers is that teaching parents must follow up with evidence of their children’s academic achievement by Aug. 1 of the following year. This can be demonstrated through a satisfactory score on “any nationally normed standardized achievement test,” or through “an evaluation or assessment which the school division superintendent determines to indicate that the child is achieving an adequate level of educational growth and progress.” Failure to comply can result in a one-year probationary period, followed by an order to cease home instruction (if requirements remain unfulfilled). By all accounts, this contingency is rarely invoked.

² All of the guidelines cited here can be found in the handbook “Home Instruction in Virginia,” available at: http://www.doe.virginia.gov/students_parents/private_home/home_instruction/home_instruction_handbook.pdf.

The majority of homeschool families in Virginia adhere to the guidelines summarized above. **However, a family that is conscientiously opposed to attendance at school by reason of “bona fide religious training or belief,” which “does not include essentially political, sociological, or philosophical views or a merely personal code,” may seek religious exemption through a petition to their local school board. Families receiving religious exemption are not required to submit the documentation listed above.** In 2010-11, 7,296 school-age children in Virginia, including 667 in Hampton Roads, were subject to this exemption (see Graph 3). This is a small, but not insignificant, proportion of all homeschooled students.

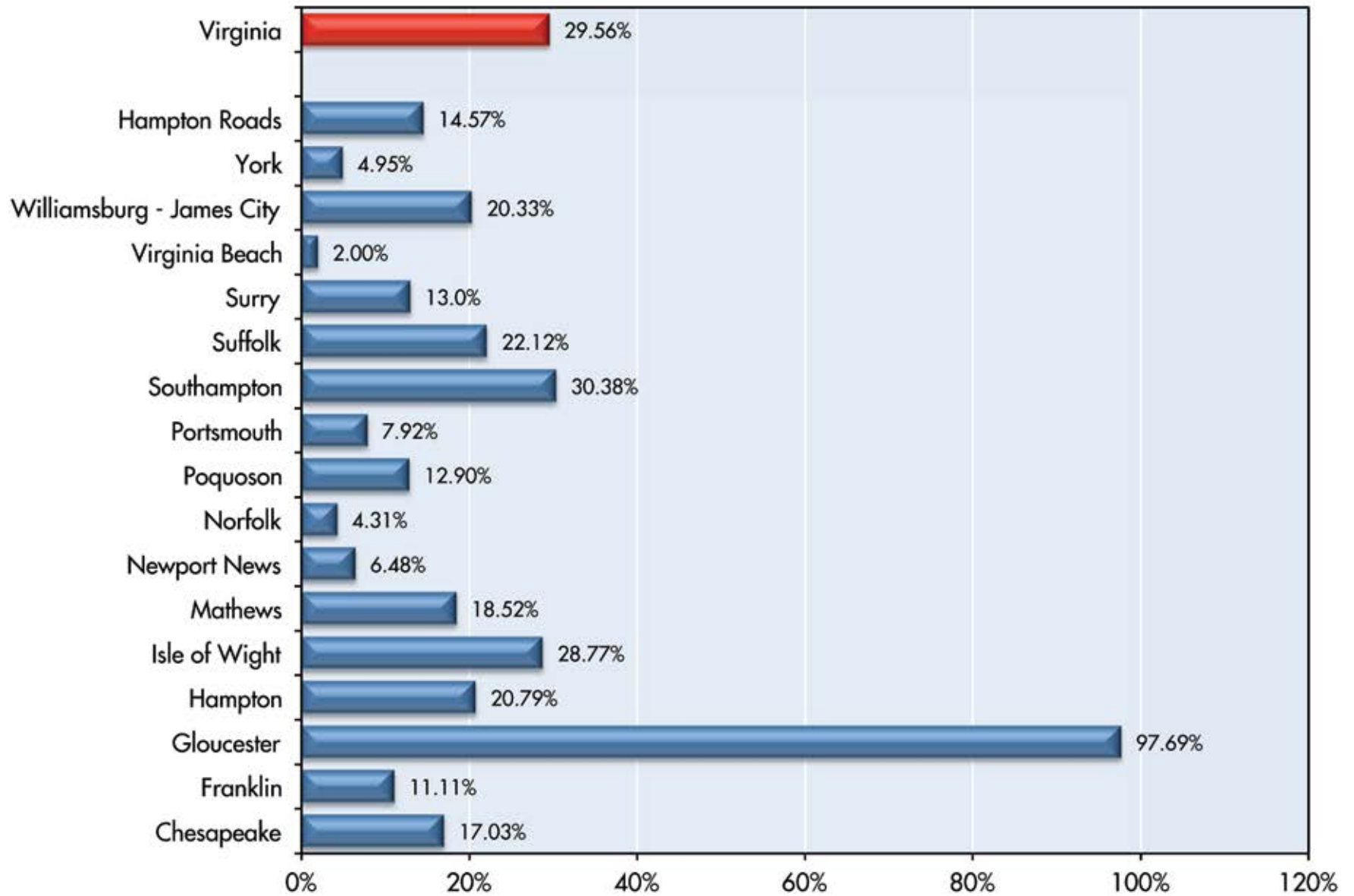
State policies toward homeschooling vary as widely as the state policies governing private schools (as pointed out in another chapter of this report). The Homeschool Legal Defense Association categorizes Virginia among the 20 states with “moderate” homeschool regulation, which is to say that teaching parents are required to submit notification, test scores and/or professional evaluation of student progress to public authorities. Six “high-regulation” states have more stringent requirements, while 14 “low-regulation” states require parental notification only. The remaining 10 states do not require homeschooling parents to initiate any contact with public authorities.³

The families with whom we spoke believe that Virginia’s homeschool policies are fair and straightforward. In fact, several indicated to us that they welcomed Virginia’s annual testing requirement as an opportunity to gain additional feedback about their children’s academic performance. Few families had encountered any difficulties in their interactions with public authorities. The most common grievance we heard concerned school districts’ varying expectations of the curriculum description that Virginia homeschoolers must submit each year. While some districts have been content with a brief list, others have asked for more extensive documentation. The discrepancy has been acknowledged by the General Assembly, which this year passed legislation clarifying that the required curriculum description need *only* include a list of subjects to be studied.

³ <http://www.hslda.org/laws/>

GRAPH 3

PERCENTAGE OF RELIGIOUS EXEMPTIONS FOR HOME STUDY BY CITY OR COUNTY IN HAMPTON ROADS, 2010-2011



Source: Virginia Department of Education

Resources For Hampton Roads Homeschoolers

A common concern voiced by those pondering the pros and cons of home education has to do with socialization. How will homeschooled children make friends, learn to interact with peers and gain exposure to a sufficiently broad spectrum of ideas and experiences? If you mention the word “socialization” to Hampton Roads homeschoolers, however, they’re apt to roll their eyes impatiently. An impressive network of support groups and other initiatives serve our region’s homeschool community. Many of the groups are cooperative and depend on parent volunteers. Some are small and informal; others started with the participation of just a few families and have since grown into larger institutions. Hampton Roads is home to homeschool sports leagues, scout troops, proms, music and drama programs, speech and debate clubs, and numerous other extracurricular opportunities. Several homeschool organizations offer academic classes as well. In sum, there is no shortage of opportunities for area homeschoolers to learn from and interact with peers.

While the following list is by no means exhaustive, the organizations named below represent some of the most prominent institutions run by and for Hampton Roads homeschoolers. Many, though not all, of the organizations identify themselves as Christian:

- Christian Military Homeschoolers: Activities and enrichment classes for military families in Virginia Beach (<http://www.militaryhomeschooler.com>)
- Classical Conversations: A nationwide organization that promotes a structured model of classical Christian education. Local communities, each led by trained parent-tutors, meet once a week in several sites across Hampton Roads. (<http://www.classicalconversations.com/>)
- Hampton Roads Generals Homeschool Football Team: Christian football team for homeschooled and private-schooled young men, ages 13-18 – practices in Newport News (<http://www.leaguelineup.com/welcome.asp?url=hrg>)
- HERE (Home Educators Recreation & Enrichment Group): Extracurricular opportunities for Peninsula homeschoolers, including weekly physical education, monthly field trips, holiday parties and other educational events (<https://www.homeschool-life.com/va/here>)
- Homeschool Out of the Box: Norfolk co-op committed to high-level secular instruction (<http://www.hsobx.org>)
- Homeschool Plus: A long-standing ministry of Ingleside Church in Norfolk that offers a broad menu of academic courses, extracurricular activities and other resources for Christian homeschoolers (<http://www.homeschoolplusinc.org>)
- Kingdom Education for Young Scholars (KEYS): Academic courses, extracurricular activities and other resources for Christian homeschoolers, located at the Community Church of Chesapeake (<https://www.keysofva.org/index.html>)
- Moore Expressions: This homeschool bookstore, one of the largest on the East Coast, has been a center of the Hampton Roads homeschool community for more than two decades. (<http://www.mooreexpressions.com/>)
- Renaissance School of the Arts: Provides homeschool students from diverse backgrounds with education in the visual and performing arts – located in Suffolk (<https://sites.google.com/site/rsatidewaterva>)
- SAGE and PAGE (Southside and Peninsula Academies for Godly Education): Enrichment classes reflecting a Christian viewpoint, offered in Suffolk and Hampton (<http://www.sageandpage.com>)
- SEE (Southside Educational Escapades) Homeschool Co-Op: Inclusive homeschool co-op in Norfolk with a classical education flavor (<http://seecoop.org>)
- Shanan Home Education: Nonprofit organization in Chesapeake that provides Christian-based support to homeschooling families (<http://www.shanan-online.org>)

- TEACH (Tidewater Educators Association for Christian Homeschooling): Long-standing support group based in Virginia Beach that sponsors numerous sports programs, a junior/senior prom and a senior graduation (<http://www.teachhomeschool.com>)
- Young Musicians of Virginia: Music and other academic classes, offered in Virginia Beach (<http://ymv.org>)
- Williamsburg Classical Community Academy: Inclusive homeschool co-op based on a traditional classical educational model (https://www.homeschool-life.com/sysfiles/member/index_public.cfm?memberid=521).

In addition to these dedicated homeschool organizations, numerous museums and other cultural institutions in our region have developed special programs that attract homeschool families. Nauticus, Colonial Williamsburg, the Virginia Living Museum and the Mariners' Museum are among the entities that sponsor occasional "homeschool days" with special educational programming. The Portsmouth museums, Norfolk Botanical Garden and the YMCA of South Hampton Roads likewise promote classes and other opportunities that are geared specifically toward homeschoolers. For these and other institutions, homeschoolers represent a growing and lucrative niche market. Targeted educational programs provide valuable enrichment opportunities for Hampton Roads homeschoolers, while boosting membership and weekday attendance figures for the institutions and organizations that offer them.

A Hot Issue: Should Homeschooled Students Be Able To Participate In Public School Athletics?

The General Assembly this year considered a proposal that would have allowed Virginia school districts to open up their high school sports teams to homeschooled students (provided they met certain academic and other

qualifications). Advocates such as the Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers argued that homeschoolers, as public taxpayers and members of their local communities, should be eligible to participate in interschool athletics. The bill's detractors – including the editorial boards of the Daily Press and The Virginian-Pilot – held that school teams ought to be reserved for students fully participating in their school community, including adherence to the community's specific standards for classroom attendance and academic achievement. Homeschooled students, they argued, should not be allowed to cherry-pick public school activities.

The so-called "Tim Tebow bill," nicknamed after the NFL quarterback who played public high school football in Florida while being homeschooled, passed in the Virginia House of Delegates, but was rejected 8-7 by the Senate Health and Education Committee. The sponsor of the legislation, Delegate Rob Bell (R - Charlottesville), intends to reintroduce the proposal next year.

Interest in homeschoolers' eligibility for public school sports extends well beyond Virginia. This spring, Time magazine reported that legislation similar to Virginia's was pending in 10 other states, and 29 additional states, including Florida, already allow homeschoolers access to public school sports (Andrew J. Rotherham, "The Home Team," April 2, 2012).

Not all homeschoolers, however, think alike on this issue. The Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers lobbied actively for the passage of this year's proposal, while the Home Educators Association of Virginia remained neutral. In our discussions with area homeschoolers, we encountered both enthusiastic supporters of the bill, as well as others who preferred to avoid any interactions with the public school system.

Some homeschoolers were more interested in non-athletic opportunities that are currently limited to public school students, such as the Governor's School for the Arts. Given Hampton Roads' well-developed network of homeschool sports and other extracurricular programs, sports eligibility appears to be a less urgent issue for homeschoolers here than for those in more rural areas of the Commonwealth.

Outcomes

The enthusiasm of dedicated homeschoolers is infectious. The teaching parents with whom we spoke clearly enjoy guiding and participating in the education of their children. Homeschool students told us they appreciate the opportunity to learn at their own pace, and to dig in deeply to the subjects that interest them most. Many families praised the flexibility of their schedules, and the ability to incorporate real-world experiences – including travel to foreign countries, as well as regular outings to nearby state parks and wildlife refuges – into the learning process. Other parents emphasized the importance of supervising their children’s moral upbringing, and were pleased to provide their children with a Christian education without private-school expense.

But do homeschooled children thrive academically and in the “real world” of adulthood? For thousands of homeschool families, and the organizations that support them, the answer is a resounding yes. Homeschoolers tend to be passionate about their way of life, and anecdotal stories of high-achieving, confident and successful students abound.

Academic studies consistently show that homeschooled students fare as well as, or better than, their traditionally schooled counterparts – in standardized test scores, in college performance and even in the demonstration of less tangible virtues such as leadership and civic engagement. Much of this scholarship is available through the National Home Education Research Institute (www.nheri.org); the compilation “Homeschooling in Full View: A Reader” (Information Age Publishing, 2005) is another useful source. Most serious scholars, however, do not purport to prove that homeschooling actually causes higher achievement. It is difficult to assess the degree to which homeschooled students’ success is directly attributable to their education at home, or whether in light of factors common to many homeschool families, such as socioeconomic stability and high parental interest in education, these students would have thrived equally in another academic setting. Likewise, studies have difficulty accounting for families that may have tried, but stopped, homeschooling for any number of different reasons.

Old Dominion University’s Office of Admissions reported that homeschooled students achieve higher grade point averages than conventionally schooled students. Of course, there is a possible selection bias here as well because homeschooled students are not a precise replication of the conventional collegiate population. Nevertheless, such evidence encourages the view that homeschooled students not only learn, but also acquire readiness to further their education later in conventional classrooms.

Few observers suggest that homeschooling is a cure-all for academic performance. Nearly all of the homeschoolers we interviewed told us that homeschooling is probably not the right choice for everyone. We heard that a successful homeschooling relationship depends on the personalities and receptiveness of both parent and child, and that the role of a teaching parent requires organization, dedication, a serious commitment of time and hard work. Homeschooling need not be expensive, but some parents found that the cost of educational materials and extracurricular opportunities added up to more than initially expected. In sum, not all families may have the interest or resources to take up homeschooling – although as persuasively put to us by longtime homeschooling advocate Cherrie Moore, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” to make the arrangement work. Hampton Roads provides a particularly supportive environment for families that homeschool.

The State of the Region report thanks the following individuals and their families for their participation and insights:

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