



# Hybrid Homeschooling: A Guide to the Future of Education

Michael McShane

**DIRECTOR OF NATIONAL RESEARCH, EDCHOICE**

*Editors' Note: Over the last decade, The James Madison Institute has featured stories about Florida families pursuing "hybrid" and "micro" innovations in K-12 education in a number of policy papers, op-eds, speeches, and short videos. While we always enjoy highlighting what is happening here in the Sunshine State, we were delighted to see a new book by our friend, Michael McShane of EdChoice, which takes a national look at this growing phenomenon. We trust that you will enjoy this article, adapted from McShane's new book, as much as we did.*

**T**he 2019-2020 school year was Barbara Freeman's 53<sup>rd</sup> year in education. After 33 years in public education and a handful more as the leader of a traditional private Christian high

school in Fort Worth, Texas, she received a concerning call from her daughter. Freeman's grandchildren would no longer attend public school. They were being withdrawn and enrolled at Grace Prep, the

local “University-Model” private Christian school that combines homeschooling with regular classes a few days each week and considers parents “the first educator.”

At first, Freeman was concerned. She had heard of homeschooling, but this hybrid model was new to her. But, as she recalled attending sporting events where Grace Prep teams were competing, her skepticism started to ebb. On the sidelines, the students at the traditional Christian private school behaved like typical teenagers. The Grace Prep students were different: they were dressed more appropriately and behaving in ways befitting a Christian school.

“The Christian schools’ sidelines were very similar to what you would see in public school. You saw the same types of cheerleaders, the same types of cheerleader uniforms, the same kind of music. The stands were behaving the same, the coaches were behaving the same.”

Grace Prep was doing something different. As her grandchildren entered the program, Barbara saw the impact of that approach in her own family.

“The first thing that I observed in addition to this, this is an amazing model of education, it's an amazing model because it does give parents the gift of time, but we have structure, we have an amazing schedule that can transfer easily into a college campus. We have parents who are dedicated to being a true partner with the educators in the school. But we had qualified educators and we had high standards and those standards were being based on research in education”

It was the culmination of a long process to develop a private hybrid model with Christian practices at its focus.

Grace Prep was founded by a group of eight families that started sharing their homeschooling challenges in the late 1980s. Most were comfortable teaching elementary and early middle-school grades, but as students got to high school, some parents grew less confident in their ability to provide higher-level mathematics and science courses. Some of them struggled to find outside teachers for more advanced subjects and were driving long distances to cobble together a program for their children. Initially called Parent-Based Education, or PBE, it wasn't a homeschooling co-op. As Freeman put it, “They wanted higher standards, they wanted structure, they wanted continuity and consistency across grade levels, across the curriculum lines, both horizontally and vertically.” The program opened in 1993 and today serves more than 500 students.

Grace Prep met with such success that other families and educators started to take notice and wanted to create their own Grace Prep-like schools. That inspired the organizers to found the National Association of University-Model Schools (NAUMS), to trademark the new name for the school model, University-Model Schools, and provide structure and support for other people who would like to start a similar school.

Today NAUMS, which also does business as UMSI (University Model Schools International) oversees a network of more than 80 schools. Barbara Freeman is its CEO.

NAUMS hosts webinars and board trainings, new school workshops, and a national conference. Perhaps most

importantly, it certifies University-Model schools, granting a valuable internal imprimatur. It also works with accreditation agencies to give an external seal of approval for all of its schools.

NAUMS is proud of its brand and jealously protects it. Certification is central, Freeman argues, to ensure the model isn't watered down.

“Otherwise these schools would be just glorified versions of a homeschool co-op. So we have to have standards in place, policies and procedures, just like any other public school if we are to survive the long term. And so we provide the credibility that these schools need with a trademark, with the certification process.”

A few years after Grace Prep got off the ground in Texas, an innovative partnership cropped up between Denver-area homeschoolers and the Aurora Public Schools. An open-minded principal, Dr. Thomas Synnott, worked with a group of families to create special classes for homeschoolers and in 1999, the Aurora school board approved the Hinkley Optional Program of Education, which later became known as HOPE (the Homeschool Options Program of Education).

The program started with 20 students, but by 2002 had grown to more than 150 students attending classes at a local church. In subsequent years, the district added more locations, expanded to serve other school districts, and grew the number of students enrolled. By 2010, 16 sites served around 1,900 students. Some of these sites were operated by the Options program and others were turned over to their local school district to operate themselves.

One of those programs was the Boulder-area APEX Homeschool Program, operated by the St. Vrain Valley School District. This year, nearly 800 students are enrolled and attend classes onsite at least one day a week. While considered part-time public school students, homeschooling is the foundation of the program. Kim Lancaster, APEX's program director, expresses many of the same attitudes that private school hybrid homeschool leaders possess:

“What we seek to do as a program, our vision and our mission is to come alongside parents who have chosen to be their students' primary educator and provide those opportunities for students and supports for parents that are hard to do at home. So, the kinds of classes that are really popular with our families are things like musical theater, choir, P.E.—things that you can't do with one or two kids at home. Also, things like art, lab sciences, robotics that are equipment heavy or require a special level of artistic skill that a parent may or may not feel like they have.

We're also trying to connect families. So, giving homeschool students the opportunity to have a peer group, to have other homeschool students that they know and connect with, to give them the opportunity to have some of those 'normal high school experiences.' Things like National Honor Society and student council and school dances and a yearbook and things like that, that kids really enjoy and those memories that they build.

We provide support and structure for the parents. We have a curriculum library where they can check out materials for their own use at home. We cannot dictate or

require materials for homeschools because the Colorado Homeschool Law prohibits that. It's a parent's responsibility and privilege to select materials, but we provide some things that they can use on a lending library basis. So, they can check them out, use them at home, and return them when they're done.

We offer classes for students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Everything from, like I mentioned, P.E. up to physics, trigonometry, pre-calculus. And then we have some options within our school district. Our high-school students can connect to some really outstanding additional programming through our district's Career Development Center, which is career technical education, and through our district's Innovation Center, which is biomedical, industrial, internet, computer hardware, airline pilots, all kinds of interesting, really fascinating technical fields that kids can take coursework in. And there are concurrent enrollment programs that allow students to earn dual credits in high school and college.”

What's common among the major hybrid homeschooling players is the primary focus on the home. Families drive decision-making. It is a decidedly humble approach by the schools and agencies that choose to partner with homeschool families, and an always-changing arrangement that can spark creativity and challenges, sometimes in the same day.

The simplest definition of a hybrid homeschool is a school that, for some part of the week, educates children in a traditional brick-and-mortar building, and for some other part of the week has children

educated at home.

Joseph Murphy of Vanderbilt's Peabody School of Education provides a helpful framework for understanding what classifies a child as homeschooled: a homeschooled child is one whose education is funded by their parents, controlled by their parents, provided by their parents, and takes place in their home. Hybrid homeschooled children have an education that is *partially* controlled by their parents, *partially* provided by their parents, and takes place in the home for *part* of the school week. In order to qualify as a hybrid homeschool for our purposes here the arrangement must meet three criteria: *physical*, *regular*, and *substantial*.

A student needs to go to a physical school location, at regular intervals, for a substantial amount of time—at least one school day per week. Students who spend all their time at home but work on an online educational program prescribed by a school or through a home-study curriculum are not hybrid homeschoolers, nor are students and families who participate in homeschool co-op groups that occasionally meet for enrichment classes, field trips, or shared activities. While both cases are interesting interpretations of the homeschooling model, they are not the primary phenomenon under the microscope here.

An example of a hybrid homeschool is The Augustine Academy, which Josh and Rebecca Good helped found in Delafield, Wisconsin in 2016. In the elementary-grade years, Augustine students attend school onsite from 8:20 am until 3:45 pm every Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday. Wednesdays and Fridays are homeschool days, when parents facilitate at-home



learning activities, including those of their own choosing, in their role as “co-teacher.” Older students spend just two days a week onsite and are expected to complete six hours of learning activities on each homeschooling day in partnership with their parents. Officially, the state of Wisconsin considers Augustine students as enrolled in a private school, even though homeschooling is a foundational part of its model.

If this sounds interesting, it is worth looking at your state’s education policies to see if such arrangements are permissible and supported. When it comes to hybrid homeschooling, there are six areas of policy that contribute to either a nurturing or hostile environment: *homeschooling laws, private school regulations and accreditation requirements, competency-based education frameworks, part-time enrollment statutes, charter school authorizing and regulation, and private school choice programs*. Each of these can be used to create a permission structure for hybrid homeschooling to exist. And each can be used to prevent it from ever getting off the ground. It is worth examining all six.

With respect to homeschooling regulations, in many cases, the first iteration of a hybrid homeschool is a more informal co-op, while all the necessary legal work is done to create and register the organization as a private school. In high regulation states, heavy restrictions on what is taught and for how long can prevent the kinds of innovation that hybrid homeschools look to foster. Detailed rules and reporting requirements also can create a barrier to entry for parents, who may opt simply to

send their children to an established private school or keep their kids in public school rather than risk running afoul of a lengthy and byzantine law.

Some states require the accreditation of private schools. Others simply require schools to register. Others require some form of licensing, and still others require state approval for new private schools. All of these can shape whether or not hybrid homeschools can or would want to open in those states. If the curriculum requirement is too prescriptive, schools that teach via integrated subjects like logic and rhetoric, as in the case of classical schools, or via the practical arts in more progressive Waldorf-model schools could find themselves running into problems. Exacting requirements around seat time or instructional hours can get crossways of hybrid homeschools as well.

The flexibility and opportunity to personalize student learning in a competency-based framework is a necessary precondition for public hybrid homeschools. Hybrid homeschools do not meet seat time requirements, so they must be able to demonstrate that their students are meeting necessary benchmarks some other way.

The shape of part-time enrollment statutes will govern the kinds of public hybrid homeschool models that emerge as well. If a state regulates what classes students can and cannot take, it will determine what classes are available to homeschoolers. How the state generates the fraction of funding that a part-time student generates will determine how substantial hybrid programs can be.

In order for there to be more charter hybrid homeschools, authorizers need to be more flexible. They need to realize that their sector is supposed to foster innovation and encourage educators to try new and different things.

Legislators can craft private school choice policies to protect the autonomy of hybrid homeschools while providing the support that their students need. Rather than vouchers, which require the state to directly fund scholarships for students, tax credit scholarship programs leave the management to nonprofit scholarship-granting organizations. Donors give their own private dollars to these private organizations, which then award private scholarships to individual students attending private schools. True, some states place restrictions on who can get scholarships and create some hoops that schools must jump through to receive scholarship students, but the burden is far less than in voucher programs.

Education savings accounts are another tool to provide support without overly entangling the government. In those programs, state education agencies or treasurer's offices create a list of approved

vendors where families can spend their dollars. Because not all the vendors are traditional schools (some are physical therapy providers, tutoring services, or a host of other educators), the types of requirements that states place are more flexible. Vendors must demonstrate that they actually provide the services that they advertise, but families have more latitude to include unique and different experiences in their children's education.

Hybrid homeschoolers are counter-cultural, but they are not opting out of community. They are creating new communities, and new institutions that bind them to one another and enrich the fabric of their lives. These schools can address the urgent needs of some families. They can put the limited time that families have to its best and highest use. And they can tackle the big, weighty, thorny, knotty problems that confront us.

This is an excerpt adapted from *Hybrid Homeschooling: A Guide to the Future of Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2021)