

## Peer Reviewed Article

### **Homeschooling: “Exploring the Potential of Public Library Service for Homeschooled Students”**

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*by Dr. Bea Baaden, and Prof. Jean O’Neill Uhl*

**A**bstract: As the number of homeschooled students rises in this country, needs for resources, instruction and support also has risen. The homeschooled students, while not participating in the school classrooms and by extension the school or public libraries, have needs that should be satisfied by library services. These include access to materials and technology, information literacy skills instruction, reading and writing support, curriculum materials and methods, reference services, as well as areas to “make and take”, facilities for quiet study or to meet with mentors or tutors. In addition, homeschooled students need the kind of library skills instruction that all students in traditional school libraries receive. The purpose of this study is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of library support to home-schooled students in Nassau-Suffolk, Long Island and to make recommendations based upon analysis. The major question examined is: How are homeschooled students served through their local public libraries? Also the study examines the perception of homeschooling families by public librarians. There are three main conclusions that derive from the study: the librarians’ reactive rather than proactive response to the homeschooled population; the lack of consistent leadership in development or outreach of library programs specifically for the homeschooled; and the public librarians’ perception that there is no difference between the homeschooled population and the rest of the patrons who use the library. The analysis leads to suggestions and recommendations.

### *Introduction*

As the number of homeschooled students rises in this country, the need for resources, instruction and support also have risen. The schools and public libraries on Long Island in New York offer traditional types of library services. Historically, public libraries are extensions of school districts in their service to students, and the nature of these liaisons between schools and the public library is to collaborate in the best interests of the student. But the homeschooled students, while not participating in the school classrooms and; therefore, the school or public libraries, still have needs that should be satisfied by library services. In fact, New York State (NYS) requires homeschooled children in grades seven and eight to participate in library skills instruction on a regular basis (NYS Home Instruction Regulations 100.10 e ii. 2007). As the children of taxpayers in New York State, homeschoolers are entitled to similar services as their traditionally schooled counterparts.

*Dr. Bea Baaden, Assistant Professor, Palmer School of Library and Information Science, Long Island University can be reached at: [Bea.Baaden@liu.edu](mailto:Bea.Baaden@liu.edu) and Prof. Jean O’Neill Uhl, is Assistant Professor Instructional Media Center, Long Island University can be reached at: [Jean.Uhl@liu.edu](mailto:Jean.Uhl@liu.edu)*

Homeschooled students need access to materials and technology, information literacy skills instruction, reading and writing support, curriculum materials and methods, and reference services, as well as physical areas to “make and take,” facilities for quiet study or to meet with mentors or tutors. In addition, homeschooled students need the same professional instruction provided to students in traditional schools by NYS certified school media specialists.

The homeschooled are also a diverse group. There are two general reasons why parents choose to home school their children. One category is pedagogical. These are typically parents who are dissatisfied with the class size, environment or curricula found in the traditional school. The other category is ideological. These parents choose to home school for religious reasons. Although most homeschoolers had been white and middle income, according to recent research, the demographics represent people from all ethnic and class groups (Nemer, 2002). The number of homeschoolers in the United States is rising. There are approximately 1.5 million homeschooled students in the United States as of 2007 (Bielick, 2007). In NYS, there are 18,099 homeschooled students; 10,254 in grades K-6 and 7,845 in grades 7 – 12 (Martin, 2009). It is estimated that there are approximately 1400 homeschooled children on Long Island, with a variety of situations and reasons for not being in a traditional school setting.

There appears to be a lack of current research as to the quality and quantity of library services to the homeschooled, particularly in the Long Island, New York geographic area. This exploratory research study is intended to discover the nature and extent of library services offered by public libraries to the homeschooled. A secondary reason for this study is to suggest the kinds of programming that will be of the most benefit to the homeschooled population, as well as to aid in collection development.

## ***Literature Review***

An initial literature review has indicated that analysis of this topic has been diminutive in recent years. There have been studies on student outcomes and descriptive analyses of home schooling but less consideration has been given to library service. The article, “Public Library Services for Home Schooling” by Denise G. Masters, defines home schooling as “the situation where parents or guardians choose not to send their children to public or private schools, but prefer to educate their children by themselves, usually at home” (Masters, 1996). She cites studies that indicate that public libraries have a responsibility toward all of their patrons, including homeschoolers (Avner, 1989; Geist, Smith, & de la Pena McCook, 1994; LaRue & LaRue, 1991). In a recent article, “Welcoming Homeschoolers to the Library,” Hilyard notes that the public library is “the obvious place for homeschooling families to obtain books to supplement curriculum” as lending books and providing reference assistance are important services that public libraries offer (Hilyard, 2008). She notes that “some libraries dread the homeschoolers, fearing a drain on the collection, complicated interlibrary loan requests, and demands for extended loan periods” (Hilyard, 2008). Hilyard presents a series of essays that describe programs that do more for homeschoolers than the traditional services and notes that these kinds of partnerships enrich not only the families but also the library staff that work with them.

A model for libraries serving homeschoolers successfully is the Johnsburg, Illinois Public Library which, following a \$55,000 grant to establish a homeschooling center has created a website and collection specifically to address the needs of the homeschooled (Slatterey, 2005). The tactics and strategies for service offered by this library will provide a lens through which homeschooling services in the public libraries of Long Island are examined. Important strategies that this library uses are: a voluntary parent advisor to the library, easy interlibrary loan, development of a specific Homeschool Resource Center, an increase in number and circulation of materials specifically geared towards homeschoolers, quarterly e-notices to homeschooled families, a library staff who has become familiar

with the needs of homeschoolers, thus lessening bias and recognizing differences in homeschoolers, especially the use of the library during public school hours, access to information regarding legal issues, and a more diverse collection in terms of differing learning styles.

There are a number of sources about homeschooling, but most are slanted towards the perspective of the homeschooler, such as *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Home – schooling* (2003). One book that has been cited in most of the research about homeschoolers and library services is *The Librarian’s Guide to Homeschooling Resources* (Scheps, 1998). In very short chapters in this resource guide, Scheps notes the issues in serving homeschoolers, such as staff bias against homeschoolers, moral or religious censorship issues, the need for materials for all-encompassing lessons and the heavy use of interlibrary loan. Scheps feels that librarians will be better disposed to communicate with homeschooling families if they are more informed about the philosophy of homeschooling. She also developed a checklist of “reasonable services” homeschoolers would like libraries to provide and then a list of resources including important national, state, regional and provincial organizations, correspondence schools, and publishers and distributors of resources (Scheps, 1998).

Studies indicate that almost all homeschoolers use the public library several times a month, but that a low percentage either never or rarely attends children’s programs (Wikel, 1995). Most of the above information is about ten years old.

### ***Purpose of the study***

The purpose of this study is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of library support to home-schooled students in the Nassau-Suffolk, Long Island area and to make recommendations based upon analysis. There are 55 school districts and 63 public libraries in Suffolk County. There are 47 school districts and 54 public libraries in Nassau County. Because of the size and varied demographic components, this sample will give a comprehensive representation of the geographic area. An electronic survey (see appendix 2 for survey questions) was distributed through the county library systems to children’s services and youth services librarians. There were 38 responses from the 117 libraries in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. In this sample, public school districts range from districts with 86.2% of the students participating in free/reduced lunch programs that indicate high poverty levels and where only 32% of the students receive Regents diplomas, to a district where 0.3% of the students qualify for free lunch and 100% receive Regents diplomas (Long Island School District Budget, 2008).

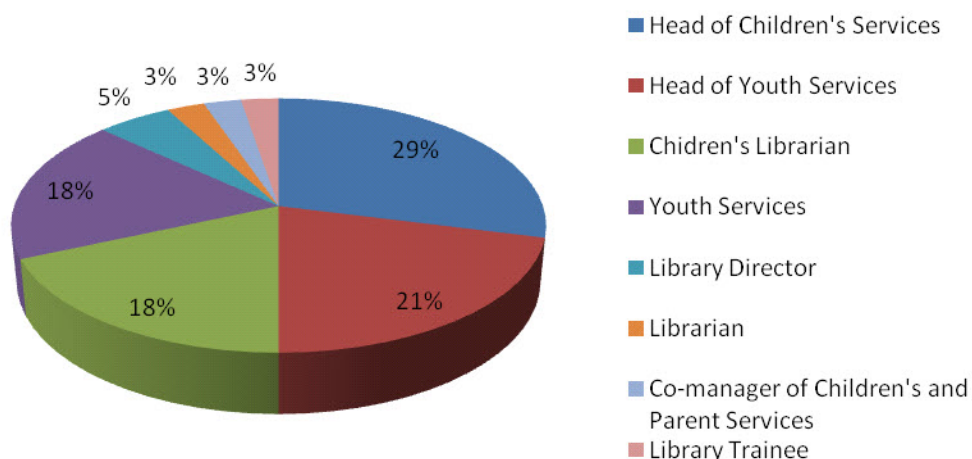
### ***Methodology***

The major question examined is: How are homeschooled students served through their local public libraries? A secondary result of the survey is to determine what the perception is of homeschooling families by public librarians. The survey asks the title of the person responsible for the homeschoolers in their libraries about how many homeschoolers he or she perceived were being served in his respective library; requests completion of a checklist of the nature of services that are provided to homeschooled students, ranging from materials/resources, library skills instruction and support services; what parts of the facility were provided for homeschoolers; a description of the kinds of materials or support for homeschoolers; and finally an open-ended question as to what the librarian thinks is most important in providing service to the homeschooled. The researchers coded the results of the survey according to the questions asked. (see appendix 1 for survey questions)

## Results

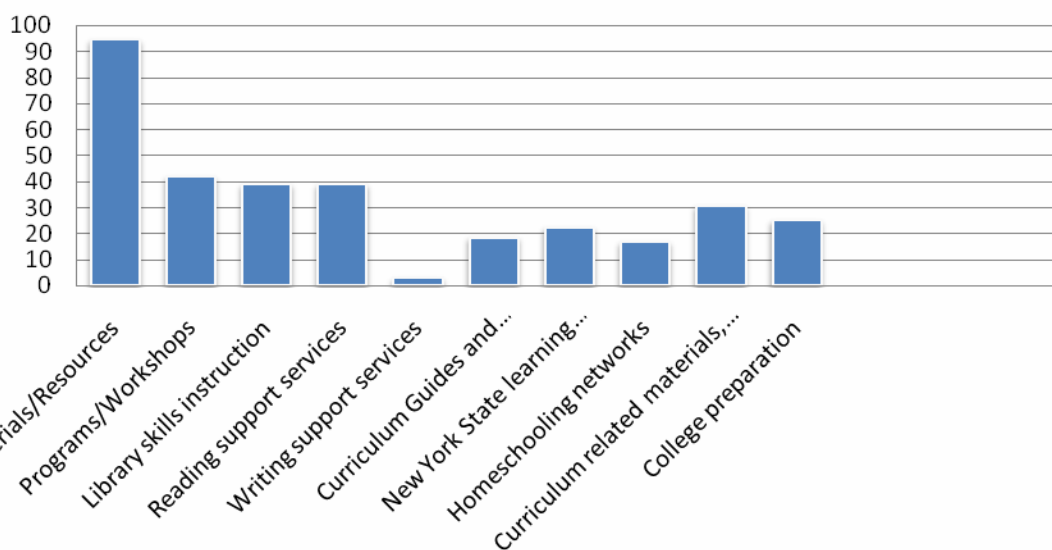
The titles of the 38 librarians who responded ranged from Head of Children’s or Youth Services to Children’s Librarian. One respondent’s title was Co-Manager of Children’s and Parenting Services. Of the 38, eight (19%) noted they were children’s librarians, 11 (29%) were head of children’s services, seven (21%) were head of youth services, seven (18%) were youth services librarians; two (5%) were directors, one (3%) was a librarian and one (3%) was a library trainee.

### Library Survey Repondents



Most respondents noted that they worked with infants and toddlers, pre-school and elementary school populations, while others worked with either middle or high school populations. Only 44% of the respondents noted that they worked with the high school population. 97% of the respondents noted that there was no librarian with specific responsibility for the homeschooled population. (See appendix 2 for

### Services provided to homeschooled students



list of participating libraries).

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Respondents were asked how many homeschooled students they believed lived in the library district in which they worked. Answers ranged from 0 – 50 homeschooled children, with 10 of the 37 respondents noting they had somewhere between 15 and 25 homeschooled children. Only one district reported that it had no homeschooled children.

When asked the nature of the services that are provided to homeschooling children, the overwhelming response, 94.4 %, noted that they provided materials and resources (See chart 2). The few comments that were provided in the open ended “Other” section substantiate what prior research has observed about public librarian’s attitude towards the home schooled: “These are the same services we offer all children and teens;” “we don’t specifically have homeschooled services, the ones checked are for the general patrons of the library;”and “as a public library we serve whoever comes in.”

A question was asked about the provision of parts of the facility specifically for the homeschooled. 85% of the respondents noted that computers were provided, while 7% said that there was a designated meeting or work space and audio-visual equipment that the homeschooled could use. Once again there was no distinguishing between the homeschooled and the general services that are offered for all patrons. Comments included: “they can always use our tables, which are frequently used by all the children;” “...can have whatever space is available;” “anyone can reserve a tutor room;” “workspace is available for all patrons;” “homeschooled kids have access to what any kid has access to.”

In answer to a question about whether the library provides materials or support for parents or tutors of the homeschooled, 65.7% responded that they did, although there was no consensus on the types of materials or support. Almost every answer was different. The types of materials or support provided include:

- Subscription to tutor.com (a comment was included: “this is something all of the children can use though, not just homeschooled children.”)
- Books, magazines, DVDs
- Internet
- Books on homeschooling in the collection (comment: “we don’t carry textbooks”)
- Homework and free tutoring on one afternoon a week while school is in session
- Interlibrary loan of materials
- Parenting and growing up materials and a parenting collection with “specific titles to enable parents as their children’s teacher”
- Several homeschooling magazines and pamphlets
- Networking, programming, meeting space, study area
- Materials from the circulating collection
- Laptop computers
- Bulletin board with program information (this library is a “member of an enrichment coalition for all students within our district”)
- Educational catalogs
- Enclosed tutoring areas
- Homeschooling representation in the 4EC, a coalition of organizations dedicated to cross-community enrichment
- Live Librarian (homework help)
- Reading and research materials

One of the open-ended questions in the survey asked the opinion of the responding librarian about the adequacy of the library service provided to the homeschooled. 32 of the 38 responded with a comment. 19 of those responding offered a “yes,” but sometimes with a qualification: “we always try to



accommodate all of our patrons;” “we would provide more...if we were asked to help the students;” “I guess our service to this particular population is OK...the parents come in more often for assistance/resources than the children do;” “but it is hard to connect with these parents;” “I haven’t had any complaints from them, so it’s hard to say if we are providing an adequate service to them;” “nobody has complained that I know of;” “we have only been asked to support their curriculum with readers’ advisory.” Once again, it seems as if these librarians were reactive rather than proactive as the following comments show: “I would do more if asked;” “we will provide them with whatever they need, if they let us know what that is;” “I would like to believe if they have unmet needs, they would communicate them to us.” One also noted that “We don’t receive much feedback from parents asking that we provide additional resources. We offer databases that anyone can utilize...we offer books on the subject of homeschooling. I am not sure what additional material would be helpful.” Yet one librarian also noted that the library “probably provides more support to this population in terms of accommodation, providing resources, and general reference assistance than to the public school population.” Those librarians who answered this question negatively noted that “we need more staff to provide more services. We can have art and music programs;” “...they keep pretty much to themselves and I’m hesitant to approach them when they come in because I don’t want to insult them in any way;” “if I were made more aware of the existence of a larger number of students I believe more outreach on the library’s part would be necessary;” “not really...the space is adequate, we have enough computers, group and quiet study rooms but we lack text books and Curriculum Guides;” “homeschooled students are an invisible population.” One librarian said that “I will be increasing the amount of services provided and this is something I have recently discussed with one homeschooled family.” Another noted that people move to her district “because of the reputation of the school district. People who are interested in homeschooling, as a rule, do not pay the high homes prices ... if they intend to home school.”

Another noted that “We have tried to connect with the homeschooling network in our community, however, it is strongly religion based, and we have been told that all [their] materials come from the network, and the on-line web sites that are used also are religion based.”

The last question in the survey asked what the responding librarians think is most important in providing service to the homeschooled population. 32 librarians offered comments:

- Being flexible and striving to meet their needs, while keeping in mind that this is a population that may require more library services than some other populations
- To get more materials when asked; knowing what they need from us
- Being non-judgmental; being open; understanding, compassion, materials and service
- To meet their needs; implementing their suggestions as they apply to the library
- Providing whatever material is deemed helpful. I am sure we can all be educated on this subject; having a collection that provides rich resources for support; up-to-date, current books and materials, curriculum info and info on alternative schooling options made available in the Parenting Collection
- A welcoming atmosphere and friendly service
- Knowing how many families home school in your community, finding out from them what they really need and share ideas so we can provide for them as best we can
- Parents have to talk to me, I don’t know what they need
- Readers’ advisory...supporting core subject areas such as science, math and history
- The need for more curriculum support...would need to know the state standards and what tests the child should take
- Social interaction for children and adults; they need to have the chance to be together

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- Providing extensive resources; obtain materials they need
- Integrating the homeschooled population with the public school children in programs
- Knowledgeable staff with a caring and concerned attitude
- The same services we provide for the entire public; as with all patrons to offer new materials in all formats to enhance learning
- Acting as a liaison between homeschooled families
- We should (and intend to) have school text books available as well as Curriculum Guides
- Providing space for small groups to work
- Parents should bring them to the programs; advise on program suggestions and we would take a look at their recommendations
- Books and websites that enhance their learning ability at home with programs at the library where the students can interact, i.e. bookclubs, crafts and entertainment programs
- “We are here!”

Open – ended answers about what was most important to provide for service to the homeschooled can be grouped into the following patterns: attitude, resources, social interaction, spaces and programming. Most of the respondents seem concerned about how their libraries deal with this special population, but as the above answers note, there is no consistency about what would constitute good library services except as they relate to the general population.

### ***Discussion and Suggestions***

There are three main conclusions that can be derived from this study. The first is that the public librarians in this study are not proactive in their services to the homeschooled. They are very much reactive in their approach and services offered. This is different from the way public libraries approach other special populations, such as the senior citizens, second language learners, or baby/ toddlers. The data from this study suggests that public librarians feel that their services to the general population will suffice for the homeschooled.

Secondly, for the most part, there is a lack of consistency in who has responsibility to lead the development of programs or outreach to the homeschooled population. There does not seem to be any structure in place or mechanism to identify which of their patrons might be part of the homeschooled population. No particular librarian in the library actually is responsible for services. All the librarians provide services as they would to the general population.

Third, and probably, most important: is the general view taken by the public librarians responding to this study: that there is no difference between the homeschooled population and the rest of the patrons who use the library. The view is that the homeschooled have the same kinds of needs as everyone else and so the services offered are the same kinds of services offered to everyone.

These implications lead us to the following suggestions. First, there needs to be a greater awareness on the part of public librarians in Nassau and Suffolk Counties for the needs of the homeschooled. The kinds of services and outreach offered by the Johnsburg, Illinois public library still provide a good model for a more extensive breadth of library services than are currently offered by most children’s or young adult departments. Some ideas include offering more curriculum-related materials, as well as providing textbooks, services throughout the school day, a repository of important laws and regulations, streamlining interlibrary loan, modifying loan periods, and providing notices of services and programs

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that might be of special interest to the homeschooled, as well as offering some of these programs during the school day.

Second, it is important to have one librarian whose job responsibility is to serve as a liaison with homeschoolers. This person will also be responsible for disseminating knowledge about homeschooling and homeschoolers with the rest of the library staff, including putting in place a mechanism to assist in identifying the district’s homeschooled families. In turn, this would lead to more consistency of awareness and service for homeschoolers. As well, this will provide homeschooling parents, who also pay taxes for public libraries, to actually have a person with whom they can communicate. Perhaps this librarian can aid homeschooling parents in monitoring whether students are in fact getting the 100 hours of library service that NYS requires for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

Third, public librarians are caring individuals concerned about providing services for all their patrons. This study shows that this is of primary concern to the public librarians who responded to the survey. But there needs to be a greater awareness for the fact that the homeschooled are indeed a special population. Therefore the kinds of services offered to the general population often do not suffice. Rather than waiting to be asked for a service, the public librarians need to be proactive in their services to the homeschooled. Therefore, public libraries should be proactive in creating a supportive and service-oriented environment that is geared to the educational needs of the homeschooled.

This study was limited in its survey of a small sample of public libraries. Additional research from the viewpoint of the homeschooling families is needed. There is a rich opportunity for public libraries to provide exemplary services for this special population within their current structure and collection of resources.

### **Appendix 1**

**The survey was formatted for respondents to answer electronically (surveymonkey.com)**

**The following questions were asked.**

1. What is your title?
2. What population of library users do you primarily serve? (check all that apply) infant/toddler, pre-school, elementary school(k-5), middle school(6-8), high school(9-12)
3. What is the name and location of the library where you work?
4. To the best of your knowledge, how many homeschooled students live in the district where you work?
5. Is there a librarian with specific responsibility to support the homeschooled population of the library district?
6. If yes, what is that person’s title or position in the library?
7. What is the nature if the services that are provided to homeschooled students in your library district? (check all that apply) materials/resources, programs/workshops, library skills instruction, reading support services, curriculum guides and textbooks, New York State learning standards, homeschooling networks, curriculum related materials, college preparation
8. Regarding the facility, which of the following is provided to the homeschooled population? (check all that apply) a designated meeting/workspace, computers, audio-visual equipment, other
9. Does your library provide materials or support for parents or tutors of the homeschooled?
10. If yes, describe the materials or support service provided.
11. In your opinion, is the library service to homeschooled students adequate? Please provide insight, opinion and comments in the space provided
12. What do you think is most important in providing service to the homeschooled population? Please comment.



## **Appendix 2**

### **List of participating public libraries**

#### **Nassau:**

Malverne  
Rockville Center  
West Hempstead  
Lynbrook  
Plainedge  
Franklin Square  
East Rockaway  
North Bellmore  
Syosset  
Freeport  
Island Trees  
Elmont  
Gold Coast (Glen Head)  
Westbury  
Garden City  
Locust Valley  
Henry Waldinger (Valley Stream)  
Shelter Rock (Albertson)

#### **Suffolk:**

Brentwood  
North Babylon  
Deer Park  
Riverhead  
Westhampton  
Sayville  
Copaigue  
Mattituck  
Cold Spring Harbor  
John Jermain (Sag Harbor)  
Port Jefferson  
Quogue  
Hampton Bays  
Floyd (Setauket)  
Montauk

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