

Back to School Toolkit: Making Sure Our Children Aren't Left Behind



PARENTS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES FACE UNIQUE CHALLENGES

As the new school year approaches, parents are facing decisions about their children's education they've never had to face before. It will take all of us – parents, teachers, and our communities – collectively working together to pool and share resources so that every child has the opportunity to succeed.

Help for Parents in Uncharted Territory

For parents wrestling with the decisions they face for the upcoming school year, this toolkit explores alternative school options, resources for learning at home, signs of stress in children, and information on free technology resources. Also, there are links embedded throughout this toolkit for additional reading.



Texas is home to more rural students than any other state.

Parents are on triple duty—working, parenting, and teaching from home – all while striving to keep the household healthy, fed, and mentally balanced.

SCHOOL CHOICES FOR PARENTS

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many parents to make challenging decisions about children returning to in-person school or distance-learning. What are the choices? What are some of the benefits and drawbacks of each option? Let's take a look at some alternative school options available for parents to consider.

Non-Traditional Schools for Learning:



Virtual or Online Schools

Virtual schools are online, government funded, and fully accredited schools that offer education to children at home. With online learning (sometimes called eLearning), children can be in a virtual classroom with an instructor while working through their digital lessons and assessments.



Distance Learning

Children work online at home while the teacher assigns homework and checks in digitally.

BENEFITS:

- Reduced risk of infection
- Self-paced
- Cost-effective

DRAWBACKS:

- Limited interaction with teacher
- Social isolation
- Limited communication skills

Homeschooling

Homeschooling is the education of children by one or both parents at home, sometimes with the help of tutors.

Some parents prepare their own materials and design their own programs of study while others use materials produced by companies specializing in homeschool resources.

BENEFITS:

Low regulations, high flexibility

High experiential learning

Ample support groups

DRAWBACKS:

Extensive parent-child face time can create tension

Patience needed when children struggle with learning

Cost development

Learn More:

<https://www.parents.com/kids/education/home-schooling/homeschooling-101-what-is-homeschooling/>

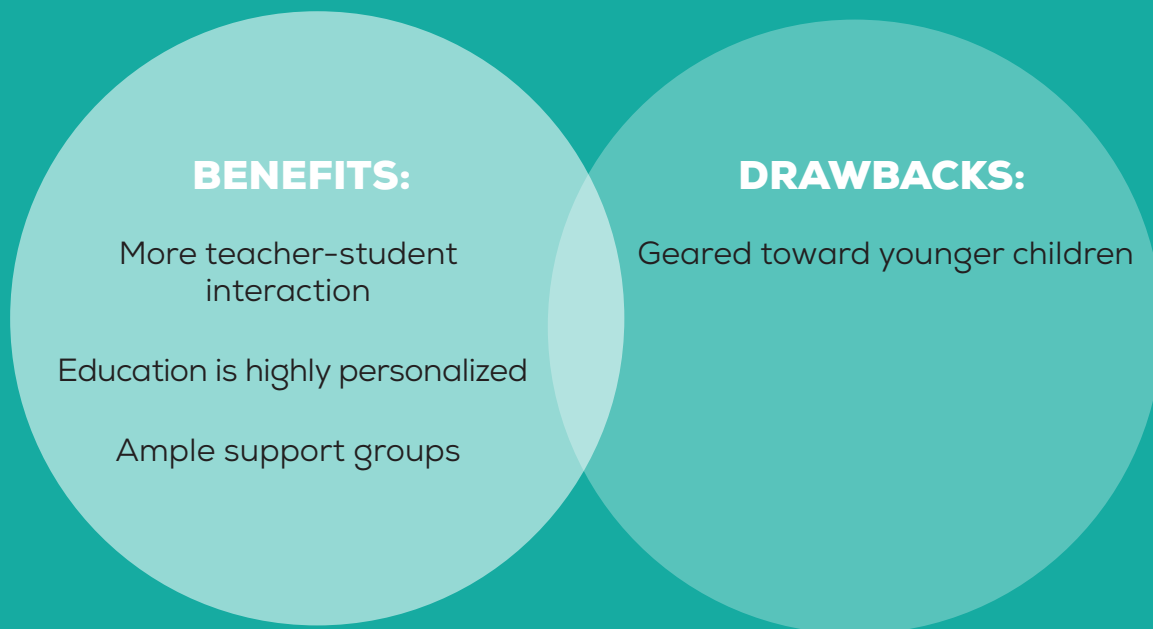
Texas Homeschool Groups and Co-ops



What are Micro-Schools?

Micro-school is a broad term used to describe small neighborhood schools that usually enroll fewer than 10 children.

In the age of COVID-19, many parents are taking the micro-school approach and creating so-called pandemic pods. In some pods, parents share supervision of students during periods of remote learning; in others, they're pooling the money needed to hire a full-time teacher to come to them and work directly with a small group of students who are about the same age.



Learn More: Good Morning America; <https://microschools.com/>

The coronavirus pandemic has caused many parents to make challenging decisions about children returning to in-person school or distance-learning.



WAYS PARENTS CAN INSPIRE LEARNING AT HOME

If parents opt to educate their children at home, they may face similar obstacles that teachers face in traditional classroom education.

Here are some helpful tips for parents to create a successful learning environment in their home.



Elementary School Work Tips:

- Create fun focus spaces. Before this school year starts, create a special "homework zone" in part of the home that's more peaceful. Stock this area with lots of colorful school supplies so there's no reason to leave until their homework is all done.
- Beat the clock. Young kids love racing to the finish. Make homework more like a game by setting up timed challenges.
- Try learning apps. Support the subjects your kid studies in school with apps that make learning about it more fun. Popular educational apps include **DragonBox** for math, Spelling Stage for spelling, and **DuoLingo**, which offers learning-based games in Spanish, French and many other languages.

Middle School Work Tips:

- Use power hours. Power hours challenge kids to focus for a certain amount of time. Once the timer goes off, they can take a quick break before diving in again.
- Plan study dates. If your kid struggles in a certain subject or has trouble focusing in a quiet, empty room, let them invite a friend or two over to study or meet up with other students on virtual platforms such as Zoom.
- Make a routine. Lack of routine can be stressful for kids. Setting a regular schedule for homework, or the school day for kids learning at home, can help reduce resistance and improve consistency. Use prizes and other incentives to reward good work, like a small treat for every completed assignment.
- Stay positive. Your attitude has a huge impact on how your child sees the world, especially in the formative middle school years.

High School Work Tips:

- Getting organized. A day planner, calendar app, or time management app like Asana can help you make to-do lists. Trust us – it feels great to cross stuff off of a list.
- Rewards. It's easier to work hard when we know there's a reward at the end of a project. Set a study timer, and if your child has focused on homework until the timer goes off, enjoy a reward together.
- Upgrade the workspace. Spruce up the place where your child does virtual learning and homework to fuel productivity. Markerboards, large calendars and bulletin boards, for example, can help distance-learning students keep track of their progress.
- Turn up the beats. From ambient sounds to instrumental hip-hop, many playlists available online are dedicated to productivity and help avoid boredom.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Even before COVID-19, many children depended on public libraries, fast-food restaurants, or coffee shops to access the internet and complete their homework.

Educators and policymakers across the country are re-envisioning education given the necessity of full-time online learning.

It will take communities, organizations, and corporate entities in partnership to address inequalities in access to technology, resources, and skills that are essential for every child to succeed.

What is the Digital Divide?

A digital divide is any uneven distribution in the access to, use of, or impact of information and communications technologies between any number of distinct groups, which can be defined based on social, geographical, or economic criteria.

What Is the Impact of Digital Inequity?

Without equal access to technology and the internet, children are not able to adequately participate in our ever more digital societies. Holding children back in this area affects every aspect of their lives, including their ability to exercise their full God-given potential.

Learn More About Digital Equity for Learning: <http://digitalequityforlearning.org/>



AT HOME TECHNOLOGY

Did You Know? A Federal Reserve study found that students with a computer and broadband at home have six to eight percentage point higher graduation rates than similar students who don't have home access to the internet.

Here are some organizations that have taken it upon themselves to assist in establishing computer literacy for those who could normally not afford it.

Four Free Technology Resources:

Computer Technology Assistance Corps (CTAC)

CTAC is an organization that accepts donations of old computers, wipes out all data, and refurbishes them before reloading a new system and selling them at a nominal cost. It is based in New Hampshire but has contacts around the country.

Computers With Causes

Computers with Causes is a national program providing computers to low-income families or to eligible groups. You can fill out the request form for more information.

The On It Foundation

The On It Foundation is based in Florida and provides free computers to eligible applicants. In addition to giving low-income families the equipment, the organization also helps with training and internet access.

With Causes

With Causes is another nonprofit organization that takes in old computers, checks them out, and makes sure that they are distributed either to families who need them or to nonprofit organizations.



HELPING YOUR CHILD STAY HAPPY AND PRODUCTIVE

The pandemic crisis has disrupted daily life for families, and children know that things are different. Like adults, children experience stress too.

Parents should pay particular attention to any sudden shifts in behavior or unusual complaints that their child brings up.

Physical signs of stress in children

- Headaches
- Upset stomach
- Chest pain
- Heart palpitations or increased heart rate
- Insomnia
- Nightmares
- Bedwetting
- Decreased appetite, comfort-eating, or bingeing
- Pretending to be sick to avoid activities

Emotional symptoms of stress in children

- Anxiety
- Mood swings
- Restlessness
- Clinginess
- New or recurring fears
- Increased crying, anger, stubbornness, or aggression
- Decreased concentration or motivation
- Emotional overreactions to minor incidents
- Social isolation, withdrawal, or unwillingness to participate in formerly enjoyed activities



WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP CHILDREN COPE WITH STRESS

The challenges we are facing as a world trickle down to our children, and in many ways, their lives have been disrupted just as much as ours. Children also deal with stress, even if we don't always pick up on it. But parents can help their kids manage with these very simple techniques.

- 01 Listen**
- 02 Don't avoid difficult questions**
- 03 Monitor your child's online activity and TV habits**
- 04 Be sensitive to a child's emotions**
- 05 Be intentional**
- 06 Make family time**
- 07 Encourage hope**
- 08 Take care of yourself**

SELF-CARE CHECKLIST FOR PARENTS

Homeschooling or distance learning can certainly lead to stress, not only for children, but especially for parents. Parents need to be aware of their own need for self-care. Here are a few everyday self-care actions to help ensure positive mental health.



Make yourself a priority

Eat a healthy diet. Research shows that what you eat or don't eat affects the way you think and feel. Exercise can help decrease depression and anxiety and improve moods. Get enough sleep.



Disconnect from electronics and social media

Consider adding an electronics-free time period to your day and take time to unplug and disconnect from the constant stream of emails and alerts.



Engage in activities you enjoy

Partake in activities that make you feel happy, productive, and challenge your creativity.



Avoid heavy substance use

It is important to keep alcohol use to a minimum and avoid other drugs.



Get help from a licensed mental health professional when and if you need it.

Seeking help is a sign of strength – not a weakness. Just as it requires effort to build and maintain physical health, so it is with mental health.

Texas Human Health and Services

<https://hhs.texas.gov/services/mental-health-substance-use/mental-health-substance-use-resources>



HELPING FAMILIES KEEP STUDENTS ENGAGED

Active Engagement:

Helping Families Keep Students Engaged

<https://sites.google.com/view/ruralresourcehub/non-tech-resources?authuser=0>

Resources that Require Internet Access

<https://sites.google.com/view/ruralresourcehub/tech-resources?authuser=0>

Virtual College Fairs for High Schooler

<https://www.gotocollegefairs.com/index.asp>

Assertiveness:

Opinion Writing Questions for Youth – New York Times

<https://www.nytimes.com/column/learning-student-opinion>

Teen Mental Health Strategies – The Hill

<https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-teenagers-can-protect-their-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

Building Social Skills With Books:

<https://education.byu.edu/buildingsocialskills/lesson-plans>

The building social skills with books website includes social skills lesson plans that are created for parents, teachers, and mental health professionals. The website focuses on supporting K-6th grade children's social emotional learning through children's literature and corresponding activities. Each lesson plan is based on a children's picture book and includes discussion topics and activities. The identified stories can be read in the home, in school classrooms, and in counseling sessions. This project is led by Dr. Melissa Allen Heath who researches children's social and emotional learning.

Source: Brigham Young University McKay School of Education

Broadband Resources:

Connected Nation Texas - <https://connectednation.org/texas/>

Connected Nation Texas Broadband Maps - <https://connectednation.org/texas/mapping-analysis/>

Interactive Broadband Map - <https://connectednation.org/texas/interactivemap>

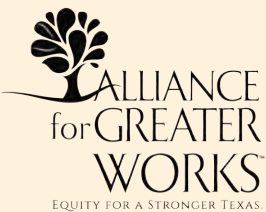
FOOD FOR THOUGHT:

HOPE IS NOT CANCELLED

You are not alone. Our country has seemingly changed overnight, and none of us has been here before. But we will get through this together, one day at a time, and so will our children.

Let's keep hope alive.

Copyright 2020 - www.alliancetx.org



www.alliancetx.org

Mission:

Dismantling the root causes of injustices affecting marginalized communities

Toolkit sponsored by



Hogg Foundation
for Mental Health