

Home-Based High School

by Wes Beach

My work with homeschoolers has followed three decades of experience in the public schools. During the last of these decades I ran a program for gifted and talented high school students, many of whom took unusual routes through school. I am now the director of my own private high school, a school that provides support for students who want to take unconventional paths. What I've learned from people I've worked with turns out to be of considerable interest to homeschoolers.

Charlie Smith was enrolled in my school for three years. During this time he compiled an impressive high school academic record but did not complete any coursework in high school. His transcript shows work done at a community college, courses taken through three correspondence institutions, and work he did with three tutors. This work, along with some strong but not extremely high SAT scores, got Charlie admitted to NYU. He applied for early decision, was accepted, and didn't need to apply anywhere else. This kind of program is sometimes devised by homeschoolers.

Homeschoolers quite often enroll in classes at community colleges. The California Education Code allows the colleges to admit young people who have not yet graduated from high school as part-time or full-time students.

Thirteen thousand courses at both the high school and college level are listed in Peterson's Independent Study Guide. These courses are most often provided by accredited public universities, and they are fully equivalent to courses offered at traditional public and private high schools. Other institutions offer a wide variety of services to homeschoolers, ranging from individual courses to a full high school curriculum.

Homeschoolers can find experts in their communities and beyond who can serve as tutors. Parents themselves often provide instruction; one of Charlie's tutors was his mother, who taught Charlie second-year algebra and pre-calculus. Additionally, many homeschooling families are supported by programs in the public schools, programs that provide supervising teachers, materials, and curricular guidance. Some private schools offer the same kinds of help.

Self-teaching is often an important part of a homeschooler's education. One of my former students is a self-taught butterfly expert. He has built public and private butterfly gardens, including one in a public park in Ashland, Oregon; written and illustrated a booklet on butterflies; and has arranged to do research with a professor at Southern Oregon University.

Excerpts from an e-mail conversation I've had with homeschooler Hannah Sharp describe her high school studies. Hannah first told me about her interest in genetics: "When I was 13, right after we moved here [Livermore], my dad took me to all the Saturday Science Seminars at Lawrence Livermore Labs. The best speaker I heard that year was a woman who spoke about genetics. I was fascinated, so I wrote to the National Institutes of Health for any/all free information I could get. Then I found a college biology book which I read through to learn more and studied about 10 weeks of organic chemistry to understand the biology. I couldn't put this stuff down until I was satisfied that I understood at least the basics of it."

At the time of our correspondence, Hannah was barely 15. Because she had decided she needed to know more about chemistry to understand genetics, she was focusing on the former. When I asked her how she was going about this, she wrote:

I actually started chemistry when I began to mess around with those mixing cups as a little kid. I did many different things like that all the time I was growing up. Then, after we moved up here, I found the Rock-It Science chemistry class with Mr. McChesney over at Moffett Field, and I got even more hooked. It was 10-12 weeks of great subjects like glass blowing, disappearing glass, weighing stuff with quality scales, examining the truth behind health scares, making root beer to see if it would explode and firing off tennis balls to learn about propulsion rockets. We even tried out the latest fads in experiments to look at the science behind the "stupid" stuff teens will do. I even remember some of two of the more wonderful class names: Burn, Melt or Stink (Does everything burn?) and Calories in Food-Love those 'tater chips! It was hands on. He barely "lectured." I loved every minute of it. But it was a backwards way to do chemistry, as far as traditional schooling goes. I "did" chemistry. I did not "study" chemistry. Next, of course, when I got into the human genome project, I had to go find out some stuff on organic chemistry. You have to know the chemical foundations for cells to make serious progress understanding genetics. So I went to see a teacher at Las Po [Las Positas

Community College] in the chemistry department who was kind enough to give me some texts on organic. I read all I needed to understand my genetics, then I put it down. That is considered very backward. Most people do not study organic before general chemistry, and the teacher at Las Po tried hard to talk me out of what I wanted to do at first. However, she finally decided I was young enough so that if I screwed myself up going at it the way I wanted to, I could overcome the handicap later. By the middle of last spring, I knew I wanted to study some more computer-related things, so I got into a CIS [computer and information science] class at Las Po. I think I may have told you, I really love taking apart things, especially our old computer and the laser disk in my old CD player. I am more interested in the hard wiring of the computer, in the motherboard, and in software engineering than I am in applications, but I wanted to find out why people get so interested in applications too. But, between Mr. McChesney and the organic chemistry I had read earlier, I've just always kept a sort of nagging interest in chemistry. So, since I am only learning a few things right now--Spanish, reading whatever I want for English, logic, piano, advanced algebra, and CIS--I decided to take "formal" chemistry too. The algebra and the CIS at Las Po are easy, Spanish is basically memorizing vocabulary and grammar (Mom taught it, so pronunciation is easy for me to pick up), and logic is just plain common sense. Thus, I realized I do have enough time to do chemistry and I'm seriously interested in it, so I went for it. So, as I said, it has been backwards, but it has worked for me. This is what I'm doing right now: I have a great little book *Mastering the Periodic Table*. I think knowing the PT is basic to the rest of chemistry, so I'm learning it thoroughly. Very easy. Just memorization. Next we found a wonderful text *Modern Chemistry*. Mom got me the teacher's edition and I'm having a great time with it. I also have *Chemistry: Concepts and Problems*. It's a self-teaching guide that I use to review as I go along in my chemistry text. Finally, I do many of the labs that come with *Modern Chemistry*. Some of the labs are repetitive and I have finally figured out the reason they are there is to reinforce the material for kids in a classroom setting who might need to go over something twice in order to get it. They aren't mandatory, so, if I understand the concepts, I skip these repeat labs. And I skip labs that require a large-class setting. Obviously, I don't have 20 other students here at the house with me. These I read, but, honestly, there often isn't much in them that matters, so I don't feel I'm missing too much. However, I do feel labs are very important. There is a great quote "One experiment, well-conducted, and carefully observed by the student, from first to last, will afford more knowledge than the mere perusal of a whole volume." I think that is so true. There's also a

magazine, "Chem Matters," and tons of web sites I love, so I go mess around with them whenever I find anything I can't get out of the books or I hit upon something I want to know more about. And that's it.

Teenagers who have been homeschooled sometimes accelerate their education, not simply to speed things up, but in order to get themselves into a challenging environment. The California High School Proficiency Examination (CHSPE) provides one way to move ahead on an earlier-than-usual schedule. Students who are 16, or who have completed the tenth grade, or who are in the second part of the tenth grade during the spring can take this exam and earn a Certificate of Proficiency that is equivalent to a high school diploma. This Certificate provides teenagers with an exemption from compulsory education, unrestricted access to community colleges, and most of the rights of an adult when they work. After one year in high school, Matthew Snyder began attending a community college as a concurrently enrolled high school student. Toward the end of his tenth grade year he took the CHSPE and left high school altogether. He continued with college classes for another two years, studying engineering and music. After spending a few months in Mexico, he devoted two years to skiing or, as he puts it, being a "ski bum." Next he found work in construction and learned a lot about designing buildings. Matthew decided to return to formal studies, enrolled at California State University, Long Beach, and earned a degree in creative writing. He then prepared some architectural renderings, gathered up some letters of recommendation from people who knew his work, applied to graduate school at Harvard, was accepted, and is now there studying architecture and loving it.

He's at Harvard, but he didn't take the SAT or the ACT, he didn't depend on having completed high school subjects to get into any college, and he doesn't have a diploma. He did take the CHSPE, but the only thing this did for him was set him free from high school.

There's a lot of mythology about college admission floating around. Harvard is very highly selective, but college admission is not by and large an enormously competitive process. The great majority of colleges are not highly selective; some very, very good colleges are in this majority. Pitzer College, one of the Claremont Colleges in Southern California, admits 63% of the people who apply. While UC Berkeley accepts just one in four applicants, the acceptance rate at UC Santa Cruz is a little better than four of every five. Casandra Miller, a graduate of my school, chose to attend Wells College in Aurora, New York, a highly regarded women's

college. Wells accepts 92% of its applicants. Derek Jansen completed his homeschooling and entered Kalamazoo College in Michigan; Kalamazoo accepts 85% of those who apply. This school is a respected liberal arts college whose graduates go on to earn Ph.D.'s at a higher rate than graduates of UC Santa Cruz, Johns Hopkins, or Brown.

Transfer admission to most four-year schools is no problem at all. California community colleges have no subject matter requirements for admission. A strong record at a community college can be the basis for transfer admission to almost any college or university in the country. While a handful of very selective colleges, such as Stanford, accept very few transfer students, the University of California gives admission priority to transfer students from California community colleges, and almost all schools are as open to transfer students as they are to freshman applicants.

With regard to college admission, Hannah, the student cited earlier, says, "Last year, I picked out six colleges in which I was interested because they offer to undergraduates opportunities to do serious research, so my folks took me to visit most of them. There are several I really like and I've been corresponding with them about what it might take for me to get in their programs. They are smaller schools, which I like a lot, and not as well known as the biggies, which also appeals to me. I am not into the competitiveness I perceive in the Ivies and near-Ivies. Besides, from all I've read, many of those schools remind me of the story 'The Emperor's New Clothes.' I don't think there's nearly as much there as many people think."

Hannah will write her own transcript, something many homeschoolers have done with successful results. If she needs a high school diploma, which she may not, her parents will provide one from the private school they've established. She will have no trouble gaining college admission.

Of course not all homeschoolers will choose to go to college. A large majority of our fellow citizens are leading their adult lives without benefit of a college degree, and many homeschoolers will join this majority. Here are just a few of the occupations my students have chosen and successfully entered:

- cosmetologist
- musician

- professional Motocross racer
- sheet metal worker and supervisor
- PG&E employee
- professional rock climber
- photographer
- house framer; working toward contractor's license
- Web designer
- chef
- electrician
- professional auto body man

Homeschoolers have the whole world to utilize as a resource. There is already an extensive record of their having acquired very solid educations; having gained admission to many colleges and universities all over the country, including the most competitive and prestigious ones; and having successfully entered every conceivable vocation. This record will only get stronger as time passes. Your professional expertise can help open up the bright future for homeschoolers.

Author's Biography: Wes Beach has 40 years' experience in education. He spent 32 years in public and private schools as a teacher in grades K-14 and as the director of several alternative education programs. He is currently Director of Beach High School, a private high school that offers a wide variety of alternatives to traditional schooling. Some BHS students skip a substantial part of high school and enter college or trade schools, go to work, start businesses, travel, engage in independent learning and pursue unique creative endeavors. Others put together high school programs that include formal coursework, self-teaching, study with tutors, work, distance learning, volunteering, travel and inventive projects.

Wes has served on the board of the Homeschool Association of California (HSC) and is at present HSC's Teen Adviser. He writes for HSC's newsletter, California Homeschooler, and is a presenter at HSC's California Home Education Conference each August in Sacramento. Wes has given talks throughout California and continues to do so where there are interested hosts.

Wes is the author of *Opportunities After High School: Thoughts, Documents, Resources*. This book deals with enrolling in a community college; choosing, preparing for and applying to four-year colleges; productive and fulfilling life paths that do not include a college education;

and documentation. Wes's son and daughter spent little time on traditional high school studies and are both honors graduates of the University of California.