

When “Outsourcing” Moves “In-House”

AFHE Reviews the Arizona Virtual Academy for our Members
By Carol Shippy

Anyone who has worked for a large corporation knows well what the terms “outsourcing” and “in-house” mean in the workplace. As a company reviews a particular goal, a group of managers and executives decide whether they have the resources to meet that goal utilizing the skills of their personnel (“in-house”), or whether the job is either too complex, or more economically beneficial if they “outsource” the work to some outside entity.

This same debate is being bantered around the kitchen table among parents these days. Only, the question is whether the educational goals they have for their children should be done “in-house” in the form of homeschooling, or whether they should “outsource” the work to a public or private school. Until recently, these two options had the important distinction of *location* for receipt of services weighing-in on the decision. However, with the advent of the Arizona Virtual Academy in our state, this once clear line is now blurred.

What is the Arizona Virtual Academy?

The Arizona Virtual Academy (AZVA) is a public school that operates out of the private homes of its students via the communication medium of the internet. Also called a “cyber-school” the basic format is that upon enrollment of your student you receive a computer, paid basic-level internet access, an assigned teacher, and supplemental educational materials for you to borrow or consume. They use the K-12 curriculum by William Bennett. After setting-up, a “responsible adult” (presumably a stay-at-home parent) helps the child log a designated number of hours between fixed starting and ending dates equaling the state requirement of 180 days of instruction. State mandated testing is also compulsory.

For kindergarteners the number of hours required is 354; grades 1-3, 708 hours; grades 4-6, 885 hours; and grades 7-8, 1062 hours. Daily, this works out to between 2½ - 6 hours, five days a week (with usual holidays.) Fortunately, the actual seat-time before the computer is not expected to take the entirety of the students’ hours requirement. It is permissible to do some of the work at the kitchen table or other part of the house. Also, the Virtual Academy has some permitted out-of-house learning opportunities that it will recognize as applicable to the hours requirement (such as a trip to the library or a visit to a museum.)

Achieving this goal comes with a high level of accountability. Though this may be desirable by some parents, those families who need flexibility will be frustrated by the constraint of having to constantly think about logging hours. Where there is illness, or special circumstances such as a death-in-the-family, the Arizona Virtual Academy assures its participants that they will “work with you.” However, 9 consecutive days of non-logging of hours results in a determination of absenteeism. If the hours are not resumed and made-up the school will need to take further action. One more note, private lessons might be applicable to the hours requirement where the lessons can align themselves to a goal written in the state standards. But, for example, if the state standard for music in 4th grade includes learning the notes of the scale, reading music, playing rhythm instruments, learning about composers and other fairly rudimentary benchmarks, it may be irrelevant that your child is playing a difficult Beethoven sonata for her next recital and practicing 1-2 hours a day. In other words, you might find that your child has exceeded the state standard and therefore hours spent in that activity will not have a comparable means of being included.

What does this public school have to do with homeschooling?

AFHE has always supported the rights of parents to choose the education they deem appropriate for their child and their family. Therefore, the existence of the Arizona Virtual Academy adds to the palette of choices available to parents in our state. However, there are some aspects of the fact that AZVA is a public school operating out of the home that could cause it to be confused with homeschooling. The model of on-line curriculum and interaction with remote teachers is also used by some homeschooling families. Two programs that come to mind are Alpha Omega's Switched-On Schoolhouse and Bob Jones' Satellite Academy. In fact, the K-12 curriculum used by AZVA is also marketed to homeschoolers at a cost of \$1,600 per child.

AFHE has worked on many occasions to educate its members about the pitfalls of using tax-generated money for homeschooling. Unlike other public programs that have tried to enroll homeschooled children (such as the IDEA program a few years ago), AZVA is forthright about stating that it is not homeschooling, and in their presentations they try to make it clear that this is public school. Last year AZVA had a total enrollment of around 300 families state-wide. Their director, Mary Gifford, told me that they expected that number to approach or exceed 1000 families this year. Clearly, this program is meeting a need. In light of such rapid growth however, AFHE would be remiss if it did not articulate that participating in AZVA is not "homeschooling on the government's dime." Some families are viewing this program as the next evolution in homeschooling and wonder why **all** homeschooling parents wouldn't want to join AZVA because with it you get "the best of both worlds."

Teaching at home is more than curriculum.

Homeschoolers in Arizona know that there is much more to teaching at home than a particular curriculum or periodic reviews by a teacher. Almost immediately after the pioneers back in the 1980's started homeschooling, support groups sprang-up to help address other important aspects of home education. We have had 25 years to develop a wide and varied number of support mechanisms for our children and training opportunities for us as parent-teachers. Being a newcomer, AZVA does not, and cannot be expected to have the same level of support in place for its participants.

What is the first question you ask as a parent after you determine where to meet your child's academic needs? Naturally, where are they going to meet their social needs! Friends are important to our kids, and through support groups, field trips, park days, co-ops, P.E. & sports teams, Youth & Government, TeenPact, 4-H groups, etc., homeschooled kids have a myriad of opportunities to meet and interact with other children. As any homeschooler knows, pretty soon you start seeing the same faces at different activities and *over time* friendships are developed and maintained.

The Arizona Virtual Academy does have several avenues of support for its member families. The teacher assigned to your child is required to plan an "outing" once-a-month. This could be a something like a field trip, picnic, or pizza night. Also, they have a newsletter designed to keep members informed and in-touch. Ms. Gifford also mentioned that they hoped to institute a type of "buddy program" where they match families with similarly aged children together for support. But at the present time, they had no options for physical education, or drama productions, science fairs, foreign-language classes, choir, etc....all of which we have as homeschoolers. In fact, there are so many activity options, the challenge for some is to decide how to *limit* these opportunities rather than seek them!

Three issues to consider with regard to the Arizona Virtual Academy.

First, many legislators have said on the record that they support homeschooling, but only with adequate accountability to the state to "insure quality" of instruction. Additionally, this is the official position of the NEA. It is foreseeable that these factions will point to programs like AZVA and suggest that laws be changed to require that all students instructed at home be enrolled in such a program. This shift is not without precedent.

In the late 1800's something known as "government supported public instruction" was instituted with the express understanding that participation by families was "voluntary." Within a few short years, compulsory attendance laws were enacted in one state after another and families could no longer opt-out of participation. It was justified by legislators at the time as "in the public interest." I can see very easily how the same argument of "insuring quality" above can be said to be "in the public interest." Homeschooling has fought for and earned its place as a successful form of education. Don't succumb to insecurity and wonder if you're missing the latest-greatest thing by not choosing a program like AZVA.

Second, it will be very hard to distinguish children being cyber-schooled from homeschooled children. Should they be denied access to homeschooling support systems as they seek to meet off-line needs? Each Independent Support Group (ISG) or special activity sponsor will have to consider and address this issue. If you paid tuition to enroll your child at a private school and that school was putting on a play, would you expect that children from the local public school would be invited to try-out for parts? Yet, it is likely that if the homeschool community acts in an exclusive manner protecting opportunities for homeschoolers only, we will be criticized and called "elitist." Homeschooling is not free. Those of us who choose it know going-in that we're sacrificing the wages of one adult and adding un-reimbursable costs to our family budget. That we succeed in making participation in special things for our kids affordable is only possible because the vast majority of the professional instruction and supplemental labor is all from *volunteers*. It is not wrong to operate upon the axiom of "give and take." We function in the best sense of the word "community" in this regard. However, due to the public nature of the Arizona Virtual Academy, the only "give" they were able to cite as an example of how they might help homeschoolers was a once-a-year picnic where their students could invite a friend. Although this offer is kind, and might be fun and rewarding, it serves to illustrate the difficulty of inter-connecting public school and homeschooling.

Third, the term "homeschooling" is actually very confusing. If I were to advise the early leaders of the homeschooling movement on their choice of name, I would call it "parent-directed instruction" or maybe, "parent-developed and delivered instruction." (I know, too wordy.) Regardless, we know that homeschooling does not always take place in the home, does it? I have friends who are on a year-long trip around the United States in an RV motor home. What kind of schooling are they doing, "campground table schooling?" For us, the definition of the word "home" does not refer to *location* as much as it refers to the fact that it is *parents* who make and maintain a home. The nurturing and instruction is from the parents, not the location. When public school becomes located in the home, as it is with the Arizona Virtual Academy, this distinction is lost (or at least harder to find.) It will be natural and easy for people not familiar with the true nature of homeschooling to interchange the two models in their speech and minds. Let us work to keep the terminology consistent. Publicly funded on-line programs are called "distance education", not homeschooling.

There are some other cautions about participating in cyber-schools interfering with 4th Amendment rights by creating "little public schools" within your home which I won't go into here. Chris Klicka of the Home School Legal Defense Association wrote a very good article about this subject two years ago. You can access that article by going to www.hslda.org and looking in their archived articles under "Charter schools." Another article called "The Seduction of Homeschooling Families" by Chris Cardiff is also very informative. You can find this article at The Foundation for Economic Education, www.fee.org.

Currently, homeschoolers cannot directly enroll in the Arizona Virtual Academy, but must rescind their homeschooling affidavit with the county school superintendent and enroll their child in a public school, even if only for a short time. Then, from that status, they can transfer into the Arizona Virtual Academy. If you wish to know more about this academy, they have a website at www.AZVA.org. Their staff is very nice and genuinely helpful. This article is not meant to discount the value of what they are trying to do, but rather to raise awareness among homeschoolers of the apparent and subtle distinctions of this program.