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Kelly L., a Scarborough, Maine mother of two, believes the local public school her 8- and 10-year-old attended last year did the best it could by providing remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. She, like parents all across the country, is worried though about what fall will look like. With many schools considering either a hybrid schedule—part in-school learning, and part remote learning—or 100 percent distance learning, parents are scrambling to figure out what to do with their children. For those who work, educating children at home full-time or even part-time poses a risk to their jobs and their sanity. Homeschool co-ops, networks of families that all homeschool, are an option many are exploring to bridge the gap in education they fear their children may face in the fall. According to research done by the National Home Education Research Institute (NHEDI), approximately 2.5 million children in the United States in grades K-12 are homeschooled, which equates to 3 to 4 percent of school-aged children. While homeschooling is a well-known way to educate children, many people have never heard of a homeschool co-op. Defining the term isn't easy because a co-op can encompass a variety of learning options. At its core, a homeschooling cooperative is made up of several families who meet regularly at libraries, churches, community centers, or homes, and work together toward similar goals, which can be based on socialization, education, activities, or any combination of these. Lauren Rowello is a New Jersey-based homeschooling educator and community organizer who also serves on the board of one of the three co-ops she and her children belong to. That particular co-op meets once a week, as does the secular, progressive co-op Rowello launched herself in 2019. Each is in addition to homeschooling and fulfills a different need. One co-op is for field trips and extracurriculars and another focuses on life skills. All are part-time, with two being full-day and one a half-day. Rowello says that three is extreme and most people belong to one or two. "Each environment offers very different experiences and opportunities for our young people," she says, stressing that it is important to try many options when exploring co-ops. For some families, co-ops simply fill the gaps of homeschooling by allowing for enrichment activities or aiding in socialization for their homeschooled children. They may meet once a week or once a month for full- or part-time schedules. The focus is often on the electives or extracurriculars offered by traditional schools that homeschooled kids might miss. They also focus on socialization, which is especially important for children whose exposure to other kids may be limited when being homeschooled. Another option for a co-op includes several parents working within the confines of a set curriculum to educate their children together. They often switch off, whether by subject or day, and take turns educating each other's children. This "it takes a village" approach helps parents by shifting and sharing the responsibility of educating their kids. The one caveat is that in certain areas, parents are not allowed to homeschool other people's children. For example, in Washington D.C., no one other than a parent or guardian may provide homeschool instruction to their children. It is important for parents interested in this type of co-op to check into their state's education department homeschool laws and requirements. This can be done with a simple internet search. There is another homeschool co-op option for parents looking to leave their children's education to certified teachers. Often, several families join together and hire a teacher. This allows for a sharing of costs, as well as comradery and socialization. What Kelly, the Maine mother, foresees for her own family is very specific. She hopes for three to four families with children similar in ages/grades to get together for a couple of hours each day in the morning, five days a week. "I envision a condensed learning time for a portion of the day and then the remainder of the day be free play/chores, assigned homework, reading, etc.," she says. Some of the advantages of a homeschool co-op include a sense of community, more say for parents in the way their children are educated, scheduling flexibility, and greater variety in terms of activities and academics. This variety comes from sharing costs for any educational/activity experts (musicians, artists, etc.), as well as sharing parental talents. Not every parent wants to teach their child to cook or sew, for example, but within the co-op, one parent might. Another advantage is that co-ops allow homeschooling parents to meet other families. This creates additional opportunities for socialization and brings families with similar interests, goals, and values together. Rowell, an extrovert with equally extroverted children, says co-ops provide her family with a "structured way to meet new people or deepen their friendships." One of the disadvantages of co-ops is the need for many families to adhere to shared educational philosophies, beliefs, or even ideas about punishment regarding any behaviors that may arise. "Parents, from the outset, must make sure they are on the same page when it comes to these things," says Ellen B. Braaten, Ph.D., an associate professor at Harvard Medical School. Another potential disadvantage is that co-ops often require a lot of time and work. That can make it tough to juggle other responsibilities. "I still have to figure out how to get my own work done during those days too," says Rowello, who also works as a freelance writer. She suggests that finding the right co-op will help in finding a balance. Additional benefits and fallbacks often depend on the type of child. Many thrive in a learning environment with a smaller social group; others enjoy a larger social circle that offers more varied friendship possibilities. Either way, Dr. Braaten says kids are pretty resilient. But she also notes the developmental stage of the child is important when considering the social and emotional benefits and disadvantages of homeschooling and co-ops. "A lot of kids are happy with one or two friends, especially in elementary school," says Dr. Braaten, who is also a child psychologist and author of the book *Bright Kids Who Can't Keep Up*. This becomes more difficult for children navigating the choppy waters of adolescence and trying to figure out who they are outside of the family, which they do by getting involved in a peer group. This certainly can be more challenging in a homeschooling or co-op environment. Another issue when considering a homeschool co-op surrounds children with special needs. Dr. Braaten points out that "a lot of parents with [children who have] special needs homeschool because their needs weren't being met in a traditional school." Often, these children do better at home because the social and emotional pressures in school create an added layer of difficulty. Dr. Braaten also adds that parents who would like assistance often work with public schools to accommodate their children's needs, though the level of support seems to vary from state to state. Of course, homeschool co-ops may operate a bit differently this fall with COVID-19 still very much a concern. Rowello says most of the co-ops in her area are in limbo and haven't made a final decision concerning back to school this year, though some have discussed hybrid options. These will be based on what people's preferences and comfort levels are. Some families will do online learning; others might opt for in-person learning; and others might prefer a combination of both. Families should consider the number of active cases in their community and the needs and safety of high-risk groups. "If a co-op doesn't have any plans to mitigate concerns about the pandemic, I'd steer clear and seek other options with folks you can trust to keep your family safer," advises Rowello. Parents interested in a homeschooling co-op can find more information in a variety of ways. Lauren Rowello says Facebook can be a great resource. "Simply searching the name of your town or a nearby city with the word homeschoolers or an adjacent keyword will help," she suggests. If that doesn't work, there are many national and international Facebook groups for homeschooling. The people there are often knowledgeable about the different types of homeschooling curricula and can aid in helping interested parents find other like-minded families locally. States' boards of education are another great resource for finding out the laws and requirements surrounding homeschooling, as well as the ins and outs of transitioning to and from traditional schools. For those looking for some information on homeschooling co-ops, here are a few online resources: The Homeschool Mom, Homeschool Buyers Co-op, and Homeschool Super Freak. For parents like Kelly, who only want the best for their children come fall, co-ops are a viable option worth exploring. Of course, the most important thing for parents to consider when meeting their children's educational and enrichment needs is what works best for their families. Thanks for your feedback!





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