



# EVOLIBRI

Neurodiversity &  
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## High School & Matriculation Options: *Why Can't I Just Quit?*

*California compulsory education law requires everyone between the ages of 6 and 18 years of age to attend school, except 16 and 17 year-olds who have graduated from high school or passed the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE) and obtained parental permission to leave.*

Yep, they gotta go to school. But which school? Do they need to graduate? What are the options? Many of my families wrestle with this, because frankly, for many neurodiverse teens, school is hard if not downright excruciating. But before making a decision to homeschool, drop out and go to a community college, or take the plunge to a private specialty school, there are a few things that you should be aware of.

First off, by law all minors under 18 (with some exceptions) are required to be enrolled in school. Which school is pretty much up to the parents – public school of course, private accredited schools, but also private non-accredited schools, home schooling, and hospital schooling are all choices that are available to families. But, while there are many options available to satisfy the enrollment requirement, some will be better choices than others for each student.

For example, if a student is attending a non-accredited high school and wishes to attend a sought-after four year college, s/he will need to be particularly attentive to his/her SAT or ACT scores, as they are the only way a college can determine if a student has the right academic 'stuff' to attend their school. Most colleges rely on a combination of college entrance exam scores and the student's high school record – and because the courses taken at a non-accredited school are unverifiable, the college has no idea of the level of academic rigor of each course. While many of our

local private schools are accredited, several of the smaller, local ‘specialty’ schools are not – ask, and make a wiser consumer decision.

Additionally, all California State Universities and Universities of California have minimum course requirements for acceptance, and without these high school courses, the college may simply reject the application, or accept the student *as an exception* provided the student has outstanding college entrance exam scores. In other words, the student must be truly exceptional to overcome this barrier into our own public colleges as a freshman.

One simple solution (one that I myself took, as I graduated from a non-accredited Summerhill-type high school in 1976) is to graduate, and attend a community college. Once a student has earned 60 units or completed an associate’s degree, s/he is eligible for transfer to either the CSU or UC system, and in fact will probably have a much higher chance of acceptance than straight out of high school.

Here’s a list of other options open to California families:

- ❖ **Take the California High School Exit Examination** – At age 16, students can take the CAHSEE through their resident school district, and if they pass this examination, they can legally end their high school career (with parental permission) and pursue other ventures. However, if they do not pass the examination, they must be continuously enrolled in a high school (accredited or non-accredited) until age 18 or unless they become an emancipated minor.
- ❖ **Public School, with accommodations** – School districts are required to give specific accommodations based on IEP/504 plans. Frequently, this is very much a give and take proposition where families rarely get all of the accommodations requested. However, many public schools are finally offering better accommodations for neurodiverse students. This is the easiest, least expensive option, and gives students a very broad range of academic and social options.
- ❖ **Private School** – There are a number of excellent private schools in the immediate area which may be good choices for students. However, they are all quite expensive, and even with financial aid, they may be out of a family’s reach. Additionally, many private schools do not offer the same (or any) accommodations that public schools are required to provide. The family can still receive services through the public school district, but needless to say, this can be inconvenient at best. Finally, families should check to see if the school is accredited by WASC.
- ❖ **Independent Study through CAVA** – California Virtual Academy is a relatively new program, which combines homeschooling with public school accountability. All classes are taken online, and each student is assigned a personal teacher with

whom they communicate daily. Students are given a loaner laptop and paid a stipend for internet services, and the program is free. All completed coursework is recorded by the hosting public school's transcripts, which awards a high school degree upon completion of all required courses. The plus side of this program is that it is free – the downside is that students must have a great deal of discipline in order to successfully complete the program without a great deal of parental nagging.

- ❖ **Independent Study as Homeschooling** – Many families with neurodiverse children have opted to homeschool their children. Depending on many circumstances, this may – or may not – be a wise solution. First off, all high school work is non-accredited. Secondly, many neurodiverse children have poor social skills – which can deteriorate when they are not repeatedly in social contact with other children, day in and day out. Thirdly, it is very difficult for many parents to teach their children at the same level as professional educators. While there are many good programs and support structures in place for homeschooling families, and while many families do a wonderful job at homeschooling, it is not for the faint of heart – it is a huge undertaking to do well, and not a 'simple answer'.
- ❖ **Independent Schools** – Another option for students is to take one or more challenging courses through a local independent school such as Center for Independent Learners (Los Altos) or Lydian Academy (Menlo Park). These schools assign a personal instructor/tutor to each student, and then teach the entire state-mandated curricula for that given course for credit. This allows students who need individualized instruction to be successful in a core, required course – and can save students' GPAs from plummeting because of a bad teacher or an exceptionally hard class. These schools offer AP and Honors classes as well, and all classes are recorded by the school of residence's transcripts.
- ❖ **Adult Education** – All counties in California offer at least one adult educational program for students ages 18 and older. While students must be at least 18 years of age to participate in these programs, they offer fairly painless ways of completing high school or garnering a GED for young adults who were not able to complete their high school work before age 18.
- ❖ **Community College** – Another option is to begin taking college courses at a local community college toward an AA or AS. However, there is no state-mandated law that states a minimum age requirement for all community colleges, and thus, each has different requirements. Most community colleges will not let students enroll until they have completed 10<sup>th</sup> grade, others at age 16, and so forth. If students are interested in this option, it is a good idea to check with the college of choice before deciding. Again, this option does not let students 'off the hook' in terms of the mandatory attendance law, but at least gets students taking the classes that they are truly interested in.

So, what is the right answer for your student? There are not hard and fast rules, and every situation needs to be fully evaluated, and pros and cons weighed. Also remember that what was a perfect solution at age 10 may no longer be the best choice at age 15 – so be open to changing the course one or more times throughout your child’s school years.

The one recommendation I do always give to families is to “play to the strengths, and accommodate for the weaknesses” – if your student is above average in intelligence, but lower in social skills, then make sure s/he is in an environment that focuses on learning, academic achievement, creativity, and problem-solving – and be prepared to work on the social areas outside of school.

On the other hand, if your student is great socially, but isn’t going to be a Rhodes Scholar, then make sure s/he is in an environment that focuses on community and social interaction, and plan on hiring tutors to get through the academics. In this way, you first honor your child for who s/he is, and secondly help him/her overcome barriers to success in the future. And remember that many before you have travelled this path, and survived, if only barely!