

Community Vo/ces FOR Public Education!

Houston CVPE Opt Out Academy How-To Guide

What is an Opt Out Academy?

An Opt Out Academy is a temporary school run by teachers and parents in the community. It is a safe and educational environment where parents can leave their children during opt out days so that parents can go to work and children will not experience any interruptions to their learning.

An Opt Out Academy can be large like the original one in Houston, or it can be two or three families banding together for a week of cooperative child care and homeschooling.

The Houston Opt Out Academy began in 2015, and enrollment quickly went beyond its capacity:

	2015	2016	2017
# of students at Academy for opt out week 1 (March)	3	30	beyond capacity
# of students at Academy for opt out week 2 (April/May)	30	beyond capacity	beyond capacity

Why start an Opt Out Academy?

An Opt Out Academy gives families, especially families who might have difficulty obtaining child care, the option of opting out. It also ensures that children opting out will continue to progress academically even though they will not be in school. In addition, it allows children to have learning experiences that they do not normally get in school because of the narrowed curriculum that testing and test prep have created.

Location

Our Opt Out Academy:

We have used two different locations, both churches. Both churches allowed us to use their space for a very low cost. The first church had a huge lawn, which provided lots of room for children to play. The second church is walking distance from a large park. Both churches have a number of rooms which can be used as separate classrooms. Each location could hold roughly 30 children. NOTE: We found that it was logistically very difficult to host two separate Academies at the two different locations, so now we only do one.

Your Opt Out Academy:

We suggest a place of worship or community center where someone is connected. We strongly recommend a location with or close to outdoor play space. The location should preferably be centrally located and should accommodate the number of children and adults you expect.

Teachers and other adults

Our Opt Out Academy:

The Opt Out Academy is sustained largely by parent volunteers. The head teacher is a parent with teaching experience. Other parent/teacher volunteers drop in when they have the time to help, whether it involves teaching, playground monitoring, or clean up crew.

In addition, we solicit members of the community to come in as guest teachers. This has been successful for us. We have had lessons on recycling, civil rights, anti-bullying, an Aztec language called Nahuatl, and tumbling/gymnastics.

We request that guest teachers share their lesson ideas with us ahead of time and that they are open to suggestions for making their lessons engaging and age-appropriate.

Your Opt Out Academy:

We recommend finding at least one or two people available to volunteer for the entire Academy. It is important to have at least one person who knows exactly what is going on and where everything is. It also helps to have a familiar face for the kids to see when they arrive.

We recommend at least *two adults at all times* and *one adult for every ten children*.

Finding teachers who do not have to work may be difficult. Retired teachers might be your best resource. If you are unable to find enough teacher volunteers, look to confident and capable parents who are interested in trying their hands at homeschool-style teaching. There may also be some homeschooling families in your area willing to help or available for consultation.

If you are unable to find teachers or teacher-parents, consider turning your Opt Out Academy into an Opt Out Camp. This would mean that you could provide a safe environment for the children but not necessarily an academic one. This would still be providing a valuable service to parents, allowing them to opt out without obtaining expensive child care.

NOTE: Hosting an Opt Out Academy is difficult, time-consuming, and potentially expensive if the cost is not appropriately shared. The person or people who agree to organize it should be comfortable asking for help and money. They should be good at delegating responsibility. No one should host an Opt Out Academy if they do not have enough adult volunteers to support it.

Cost:

Our Opt Out Academy:

We reimburse the church for utilities, etc. using money from opt out parent donations. We spend money on materials, especially for science and art. We ask that children bring lunch, water, and snacks, but we do provide water and snacks, most of which are donated by parents.

We do not charge parents anything, but we *actively encourage donations*. We suggest parents pay \$25+ per day. This allows us to pay for facility and supply costs.

Your Opt Out Academy:

Depending on what your location costs, it is possible that you will spend a significant amount. We recommend keeping the Academy free and accessible to all families. However, you might consider soliciting a “recommended donation” from parents so that you can cover your costs. If organizers do not actively request donations, they will get stuck paying for everything. This is a cost that should be shared by the community.

Suggested supplies:

*lined paper, *drawing paper, *pens, *pencils, *pencil sharpeners, *scissors, *glue, *markers, *file folders (to hand out to students as a place to keep their papers), *name tags, *photocopied Mad Libs and/or other fun independent activities for children for the morning while they’re waiting for everyone to arrive, *trash bags, *tissues, *toilet paper, *hand

soap and/or hand sanitizer, *cleaning supplies, *first aid kit, *water, *snacks, *paper cups and plates, *paper towels, *technology (Do you need WiFi?), *power strip, *fridge or cooler for lunches, *art project supplies, *science project supplies

Paper work for parents:

We have parents sign two forms, a required *medical and liability release form* and an optional *media release* form. If a parent does not sign the media release form, we make sure to keep that child away from the cameras if media comes. Our old release forms are [here](#).

Sign up:

Parents sign up for our Academy before it begins, via an online survey. Here is our old one: bit.ly/optout2016. Asking parents to make reservations ahead of time allows you to tentatively plan for how many students to expect on which days and how many adult volunteers you will need on those days. There tend to be busy days and less busy days. Be prepared to be flexible.

Scheduling/subjects:

Our Opt Out Academy:

The schedule varies depending on student arrival times and volunteer teachers' schedules. We do academics mostly in the morning. In the afternoon, we try to do physical or hands-on activities. We give the students a long lunch and lots of recess. We like to be near a park because if an afternoon teacher has to cancel or if everyone is tired, we can use recess as a fall back activity. In the past we focused on writing, math, and science because of our particular teachers' expertise. We also try to offer enrichment activities, such as fine arts and music.

Your Opt Out Academy:

BE FLEXIBLE with your schedule and respond to your students' and volunteers' needs. If you're stumped, you can look at the [Texas homeschool guidelines](#). Remember, you don't have to be perfect. Even if you offer nothing but recess all day, you are still providing students with more academic benefit than they would be getting from taking STAAR.

Sample schedule:

7:30 – 8:00 *Arrival. Independent activities. Parents sign release forms on their first day.
 8:00 – 9:00 *First rotation - (rotating 3 subjects: writing, math, science)
 9:00 – 9:20 *Recess
 9:25 – 10:25 *Second rotation
 10:25 – 10:45 *Recess
 10:50 – 11:50 *Third rotation
 11:50 – 12:50 *Lunch and recess
 12:55 – 1:40 *Afternoon first rotation - (drama, storytelling, social studies, nature walks, etc.)
 1:40 – 2:00 *Recess
 2:05 – 2:50 *Afternoon second rotation
 2:55 – 3:15 *Clean up and free time until pick up

Websites:	www.OptOutTexas.org houstonscvpe.org/opt_out_academy
------------------	--