

What Happens to Self-Directed Learners? (Part 2)

North Star Alumni Report Two: Return to School or Independent Homeschooling

By Kenneth Danford

This article is Part Two of a two-part series on what happens to North Star alumni after they move on from North Star. For a complete description of North Star and for the definitions of the categories and outcomes used in this article, please see the Appendix. Read Part One [here](#).

When Joshua Hornick and I created North Star back in 1996, we imagined we would be supporting teens to leave school and embark on the journey of self-directed learning. We had read *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education* by Grace Llewellyn, and we expected to coach teens to move through North Star and on to college, work, and other young adult adventures. From the very first year, however, we saw the use of North Star to be more varied and complicated. It turned out that every year, some of the members that we had inspired to try living and learning without school would leave North Star and return to high school. As the years mounted, we began to realize that this short-term use of North Star was a genuine pattern for a solid number of teens. We also saw that some teens left North Star to become independent homeschoolers, or to resume an independent homeschooling experience they had enjoyed prior to joining our program.

During the early years, as the first teens informed me of their plans to return to school, I confess to feeling some disappointment. Were we failing these members? Were they leaving us with anger or frustration? We were not collecting data about their reasons for returning to school, but over

time, I have come to understand this choice as a natural part of our work. Some teens just want a year out of school during the middle school years as a “gap year” before high school. Others become curious about what a different school has to offer, whether it’s the public high school of the system they left, a charter school, or a private school. Some want the high school experience of academic classes, sports, and proms. Some want to prove to themselves that they can handle this world in a way they could not before.

Certainly, some teens find North Star to be difficult to manage, or simply not worth the money and effort to be a member. They discover that self-directed learning has its own set of challenges. They find the meetings with their parents to discuss their progress and choices to be full of conflict. They don’t connect with any particular staff or teens at North Star. They discover that their lives outside of North Star are full and satisfying, and that they can pursue self-directed learning without our support.

For many years, I wasn’t sure whether these short-term members who left North Star to return to school or pursue independent homeschooling really counted as “Alumni.” I felt our impact on them had been limited, and that it would be odd to claim any long-term success as related to North Star after they had returned to high school and graduated. In fact, I felt dubious that many of these teens remembered or felt strongly about their time at North Star.

However, as we launched this project of determining alumni outcomes in 2015, I was directed by Joe Berger, an Associate Dean in the University of Massachusetts School of Education, to absolutely include this group. These members qualified as “Alumni” by definition, and we could describe their outcomes as a matter of interest. As I began emailing and calling these teens, many of whom I had not been in touch with for years, I experienced surprise and delight. For the most part, these teens were happy to hear from me, and delighted to be included in some sort of North Star Alumni report. They knew who I was, and had interesting things to say about their year or two at North Star. I encountered no anger or frustration at our program. In some cases, teens called it the “best year of my education”, or expressed the sentiment, “I was too angry or anxious or immature at the time to use North Star well.” Others said that the time out of school was just what they needed, and in some cases, opened them up to a new lifelong perspective about challenging mainstream expectations.

In other words, I felt somewhat redeemed! I now appreciate the wisdom of Dean Berger in pushing me to contact these alumni. Researching the qualitative outcomes that I learned in this outreach is beyond the scope of this current study. However, I now feel that presenting the data we have on this group’s outcomes is a meaningful effort.

Here is one of the more powerful replies I received. It is from Clare Ryan, who came to North Star (then called Pathfinder) for her eighth grade year in 1999–2000 and went on to Amherst Regional High School the following year. Aside from some very limited exchanges through her parents over the years, I had not spoken with Clare until I contacted her in 2015. She emailed:

A quick sketch of my recent career. I graduated from Yale Law School in 2013. I spent the 2013–2014 academic year teaching in the Political Science department at Macalester. I spent 2014–2015 as a human rights fellow at the European Court of

Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. Now, I am a law clerk on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Diego, CA. I was admitted to the MA bar, although I haven't actually practiced law there.

I'm not sure what's next exactly, but I've loved the adventure so far! Honestly, I wouldn't have had the confidence and motivation to do half of these things if it hadn't been for my year at North Star (Pathfinder – at the time). That year was absolutely transformative and I would be happy to talk to interested kids or families about it, if that would ever be helpful to you.

The Groups of Alumni

There are 195 Alumni whose first activity after North Star was either going to Middle or High School or Pursuing Independent Homeschooling. As I reviewed the list, I felt that to make the most sense of these outcomes, I needed to also consider whether each teen came to North Star from a school or a homeschooling experience. This created four subgroups:

- a) **Attending School prior to North Star and returning to School after North Star**
- b) **Attending School prior to North Star and moving on to Independent Homeschooling after North Star**
- c) **Homeschooling prior to North Star and moving on to a School**
- d) **Homeschooling prior to North Star and resuming Homeschooling after North Star**

It turns out that we only have a significant number of alumni for the first group, and I will share that data and offer some analysis for this group as the major focus of this report.

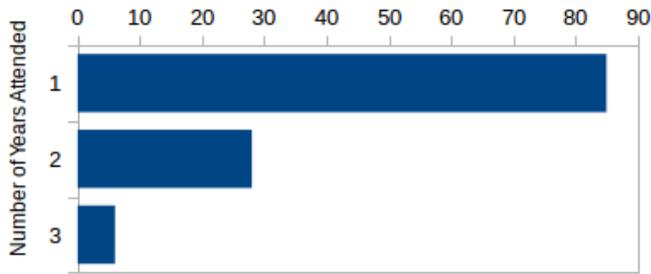
After accounting for alumni still under age 18 and those with whom we have lost touch, the remaining three groups each have fewer than 20 alumni that we can count in this research (Group b: n=14, Group c: n=13, Group d: n=18.) I will offer a description and brief summary for these groups. Several of the teens who have returned to school or taken on independent homeschooling are still under age 18 and thus still in this same activity. Also, we have lost contact with some alumni as they moved on from their high school years. This situation means that the behavior of any one or two alumni in these small groups significantly affects the percentages we might report. We do wish to be as transparent as possible, and therefore provide the raw numbers for all three groups in one table below.

Group A

Attending School Prior to North Star and Returning to School after North Star

These are teens who were enrolled in school prior to joining North Star, and whose first activity when leaving North Star was to enroll in a school.

Number of Years Alumni Attended North Star
(n=119, mean=1.3)



Total Number in Group:	119
Those under age 18 still in school:	19
Those with whom we have lost touch:	15
Total Net Number for Post-North Star Activities:	85

Intake Categories (n=119):

Managing Well:	47%
Refusing or Resisting School:	26%
Mental Health Issues:	24%
Major Learning Differences or Health Issues:	3%

First Activity after High School (n=85):

Community College:	20%
Four Year College:	36%
Ordinary Work:	35%
Self-Employment:	7%
Unusual Work:	1%
Certificate or Training Program:	1%

Cumulative Activities after Homeschooling (n=85):

(adds up to more than 100% because many alumni have done more than one of the activities listed)

Years Out of North Star:	Mean = 9.8; Median = 9; Range = 1-20
Community College:	25%
Four Year College:	46%
Ordinary Work:	45%
Self-Employment:	9%
Unusual Work:	6%

Certificate or Training Program:	6%
Graduate School:	9%
Professional Work:	21%
Discrete individuals who did at least one of: Community College, Four-Year College, or Certificate-Training Program:	62%

Summary

This group contains teens who were almost evenly divided regarding their high school experiences prior to joining North Star. About half of them were Managing Well and about half of them were struggling in school. They used North Star for about a year, and returned to school. Frequently, they returned to a different school from the one they were attending prior to North Star. While we have not tracked the specific schools at which they enrolled after North Star, we do know that most of these teens enrolled in 9th grade. In our region, most of the public schools resist giving high school credit to homeschoolers for work they completed as homeschoolers, which means that in most cases these teens must enroll as 9th graders. In some cases, and at some schools, strong parents have won exceptions for their children to enter as 10th graders, but we know these cases to be rare. In some cases, North Star members use North Star for 6th or 7th grade and return to middle school.

The data show that these teens eventually moved on to college and work experiences at rates that seem to be close to the general public school outcomes. The 62% of North Star alumni who eventually enroll in higher education compares favorably to the percentage of 9th graders in Massachusetts who enroll in college, [57.3% in 2010](#).

Analysis

This group best meets the [“Eighth Grade Out”](#) profile I have written about elsewhere: teens using North Star for a “gap year” experience prior to entering high school. Some of these teens are doing well, but are seeking an alternative to middle school. Others are struggling with grades, motivation, and their general commitment to school as they face four to six more years of secondary school ahead of them. They use North Star for a year or so, and then decide to re-enroll in school. Some of these alumni had planned on returning to school even prior to joining North Star. The majority of these alumni who return to school go back to a high school instead of a middle school, or move on to a charter school or a private school. They choose the structure and opportunities of a traditional school model.

Conclusion

The North Star alumni outcomes suggest that most of the teens in this group who return to school continue on much as traditional high school students. We celebrate the teens who use North Star in this short-term way to make significant improvements in their lives.

Groups B, C, and D

Data for Three Groups of North Star Alumni Who Enrolled in School or Independent Homeschooling After North Star

	School to Home- schooling	Homeschooling to School	Homeschooling to Homeschooling
Intake Categories	n=29	n=18	n=29
Managing Well	5	15	23
Mental Health Issues	15	1	2
Resisting or Refusing	4	1	1
Major Differences	5	1	3
Not Counted in Further Activities			
Still Under Age 18	11	5	8
Don't Know	14	0	3
Second Activity Post-North Star	n=14	n=13	n=18
Community College	7	8	5
Four Year College	3	2	3
Training-Certificate	0	0	0
Ordinary Work	2	2	9
Self-Employment	1	1	2
Unusual Work	1	0	0
Cumulative Activities Post-North Star	n=14	n=13	n=18
Community College	7	8	5
Four Year College	6	4	3
Training-Certificate	0	0	0
Ordinary Work	5	5	11
Self-Employment	1	3	3
Unusual Work	1	0	1
Graduate School	1	1	1
Professional Work	2	1	2
Distinct Individuals Enrolled in College	11	10	8

Attending School Prior to North Star and Moving on to Independent Homeschooling after North Star

These are teens that were enrolled in school prior to joining North Star, and whose first activity when leaving North Star was to continue homeschooling independently. These are teens who, for the most part, would not have embarked on homeschooling or self-directed learning without North Star. They used our program for two years or so, and then felt confident to continue homeschooling independently.

These teens arrived at North Star mostly struggling in school. Many had some Mental Health Issues, or were Resisting and Refusing. These teens and families were trying hard to make school work, with a good degree of stress. North Star encouraged these families to shift their efforts from school assignments to the teens' general health and their interests. As the teens began to settle into new lives and routines, they could begin to assess the role of North Star in their activities. This group of alumni could see that North Star had set them on a healthier path, but that after a year or two of involvement, they actually preferred continuing the approach without being members of our program.

All of the staff members at North Star feel happy to be associated with these teens. We are delighted to see them declare with some confidence, "I like self-directed learning. I don't need North Star anymore." For me, seeing teens who were uncomfortable or unhappy in school move on through North Star to develop satisfying independent routines is a true highlight. We all know people who are not "joiners", who don't like group classes and clubs. When these people are teens trapped in a miserable school experience, it is a joy to provide them an alternative. When they declare a year or two later, "thanks, but now I don't want you, either," it is a sign of a job well-done.

Most of these teens that we have stayed in touch with have moved on to college after they complete their homeschooling experiences.

Attending School Prior to North Star and Moving on to Independent Homeschooling after North Star

The vast majority of these teens presented themselves as Managing Well in their homeschooling experiences prior to joining North Star. They joined for about a year, and moved on to a school. In most cases, North Star was a halfway step between independent homeschooling and enrolling in school. These teens and families felt that they had completed their independent homeschooling experience and were looking for something different for their high school years. Again, I feel mutual respect with these teens and their choices. After a childhood experience of independent homeschooling, they felt curious to explore the mainstream experience. They wanted assignments and grades, they wanted the sports and clubs, and they wanted the larger community. North Star does not offer such a contrast to lifelong homeschooling.

After a year of North Star, these teens enrolled in school with thoughtfulness. We know that most of them proceeded through high school and on to college successfully. We have remained in touch

with many of these teens.

Homeschooling Prior to North Star and Resuming Homeschooling After North Star

The vast majority of these teens presented themselves as Managing Well in their homeschooling experiences prior to North Star, spent about a year or two at North Star, and then resumed independent homeschooling. Unlike the independent homeschoolers included in [Report One](#) who stayed with North Star until moving on to young adulthood, these teens did not remain at North Star in a lasting way. Some were very involved for a year or so with our community, and others never fully connected with our community. Over my career at North Star, I have developed a profound respect for independent homeschoolers, and I recognize that not all of them are eager to join a center or need all of the services North Star provides. In my public presentations, I often make the analogy that many people who exercise do not join a gym, and thrive with their independent routines. I don't believe we can make significant conclusions about either North Star or these teens based on their short-term involvement at North Star. They joined, they used North Star with mixed satisfaction, and they moved on (though we remain in touch with many of them). Without offering our limited statistics that may be skewed, we know that most of these teens have moved on successfully to either college or work.

Final Thoughts for Report Two: Alumni Who Moved on to School or Independent Homeschooling

Many teens use North Star as a short-term break from traditional school or as a short-term addition to their homeschooling approach. Most of these teens are members for just one or two years, and move on from North Star to continue their learning as high school students or homeschoolers. At North Star, we have come to understand this limited use of North Star as an expected part of our program, and we see that our philosophy and personal relationships with these alumni have long-lasting impacts. In fact, many North Star staff and board members have children who have used North Star in this limited way.

I believe the experiences are different based on whether the teen was already homeschooling prior to North Star and already felt that school was optional, or whether North Star was opening up a completely new and different lifestyle for the teen. The number of teens in three of the four groups described in this report is small enough to make me cautious about conclusions. Nevertheless, the data, combined with my personal knowledge of these teens and their experiences, leads me to feel confident that a short-term use of North Star carries many potential benefits and essentially no risks. North Star welcomes all interested teens and families as a core commitment. In this report, we recognize the value of those who choose a short-term use of our program.

Appendix

(This material is summarized from [Report One](#))

What is North Star?

Founded in 1996 in Amherst, MA, North Star is a program that makes living and learning without school a viable option for any interested teen in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. Now in its fourth location in Sunderland, MA, North Star coaches teens and families to utilize the legal mechanism of homeschooling to become independent learners, and then hosts a community center to provide its members with a range of academic and social opportunities.

North Star functions much like a community center, with approximately forty different classes, each meeting once per week, such as Writing Workshop, Theatre, Rock Band, Science, and Social Issues. North Star members also enjoy more than one hundred one-on-one tutorials each week, from math to writing to guitar lessons to drawing and much more. North Star hosts a social space where teens can gather, as well as a quiet library and a kitchen that is open to everyone. Each North Star member has a weekly meeting with an advisor to discuss how this approach is working and what other challenges the teen may want to undertake.

North Star is not a school: being a member does not satisfy state compulsory school requirements, and North Star does not offer credits or diplomas. North Star supports its members under age 16 to register as homeschoolers with their local school districts.

North Star members who desire an official high school diploma take the HiSet (similar to the GED.)

For the 2016–2017 academic year, North Star has approximately 75 members, and approximately 50 members attend each of the four days per week that North Star is open. Teens are free to come and go from North Star at will. Most are engaged in other community activities throughout the week, such as sports, youth groups, paid jobs, volunteer work, and community college courses. Each family corresponds directly with its local public school superintendent around the academic homeschooling process until the teen reaches 16 years old, while North Star staff supports each family as needed.

The building itself is a 4800 square foot two story office building with 13 rooms for classes, tutoring, and offices. There is ample outdoor play space in the back and on one side. North Star is located on a public bus line connected to the town of Amherst and the University of Massachusetts. The building is within walking distance to a public library and a couple of convenience markets.

North Star has sustained its commitment to make self-directed learning available to every interested family, welcoming all teens regardless of their family's financial circumstances or their prior school records. The annual membership fee ranges from \$3,000 for one day per week to \$7,500 for three or more days per week. Approximately 40% of North Star families receive a fee reduction. Total fee reductions account for approximately 33% of billed fees.

North Star has nine core staff members who are paid reasonable salaries, and there is an extended staff of another 25–30 college students and other volunteers. The annual budget for North Star is approximately \$400,000.

The Data and Definitions

At a basic level, what we have done in this research is try to describe the categories of teens that join North Star, and what they do after they leave North Star.

For Intake, we have two questions. First, at the time of joining, was the teen coming from a “School” or were they already legally “Homeschooling.” Second, how were they doing in this prior situation? Our goal to have a relatively small but inclusive set of presenting categories has led to: “Managing Well,” “Mental Health Issues,” “Resisting or Refusing,” and “Major Learning Differences or Physical Health Issues.” We recognize the arbitrary and limiting nature of labeling in this way, but for the sake of the project we feel reasonably comfortable with this manner of describing our population. These intake categories have been assigned by current and former staff members based on our memories. As of 2015, we have begun assigning categories at the time each member joined.

Managing Well in School or Independent Homeschooling: These youth are doing well in their current setting, but are seeking more freedom and support to pursue their interests. In school, these teens may be on honor roll, attend regularly, and have few discipline problems. Their main complaint is feeling bored in school or not having enough time outside of school to pursue their interests. In a homeschooling setting, these teens are thriving, but investigating North Star as a potential addition to their routine and seeking a larger social community.

Mental Health Issues in School or as an Independent Homeschooler: These youth are struggling with conditions such as anxiety or depression. They may be self-harming, and sometimes suicidal. They may feel bullied and unsafe due to past experiences. In school, these teens are not attending regularly due to these issues and find this situation to be self-spiraling, adding additional anxiety and tension to their lives. As homeschoolers, they are having difficulty getting out of the house and sustaining any progress with hobbies and interests.

Refusing or Resisting in School or as an Independent Homeschooler: These teens have stopped trying to succeed in school. They may have stopped attending, or are skipping days on a regular basis. In school, they are refusing to do homework. Sometimes they are acting out and developing a negative behavior record. As homeschoolers, they experience conflict with their parents about basic family expectations.

Major Learning Difference or Health Problems: A small group of teens arrive at North Star without fitting into any of the above categories. The most common reason is they have some physical health disease or condition that is making regular attendance and participation in school or homeschooling impossible, despite the teen’s desire to succeed. One common example is sleep disorder. Also, North Star has had several members diagnosed with Asperger’s, which best fits in this category.

For life after North Star, we have attempted to track what our members do when they first leave North Star, and then what they do in their subsequent activities as they grow older. (Our oldest

alumni are now in their mid-to-late thirties.) Options here for First Activity include: “Community College,” “Four-Year College,” “Certificate or Training Program,” “Regular Work,” “Unusual Work,” “Self-Employment,” and “Don’t Know.” ([Definitions are in Report One.](#)) For subsequent activities, we also have “Graduate School” and “Professional Work.” This information has been obtained by current and former staff members that frequently remain in touch with our alumni as a normal practice, and also through deliberate outreach by phone, email, Facebook, texting, and in-person contact for the sake of this research.

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