

# Entering a new reality, Pittsylvania County libraries use headsets for entertainment, education

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Dec 10, 2019



Tim Rogers, branch manager at the Brosville/Cascade library, tests out the racing game on one of the virtual reality headsets. He has implemented virtual reality Tuesday, which occurs every second and fourth Tuesday at 4:30 p.m.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

Sitting in the middle of the room in swiveling chairs, the two children wore what looked like scuba gear over their head, except they couldn't see out of the headsets.

The sound of jingling coins spilled from the virtual reality headset that immersed Logan Garrett, 13, inside the world of Temple Run, while the sound of revving engines thundered from the headset of 7-year-old Maddie Garrett.

"The police cars are invincible," she said to Tim Rogers, branch manager of the Brosville/Cascade branch of Pittsylvania County Library, who sits to the side, watching the children spinning, talking to themselves and pushing buttons on the small remotes clutched in their hands.

“I can’t get around those trucks,” Rogers responded.

Every second and fourth Tuesday, Rogers has started the tradition of Virtual Reality Tuesday at the Brosville/Cascade branch, which has four Oculus virtual reality headsets.

With a \$3,000 grant for the summer reading program from the Community Foundation of the Dan River Region, Pittsylvania County libraries have branched into the world of virtual reality — headsets that put the wearer in the middle of an electronic world. Initially purchased as a supplement to summer reading, the library staff has pivoted to using the virtual reality headsets for entertainment purposes as well.

Lisa Tuite, director of Pittsylvania County Public Library system, said the goal with the virtual reality machines is to expose children to different topics they could then read about, as well as draw into the library people who wouldn’t otherwise come.

“We certainly have fiction and nonfiction books that relate to story lines in VR, but also other ... tools to let them explore science, technology, engineering, math, art and crafts,” Tuite said.

Lisa Varga, executive director of the Virginia Library Association, said the use of virtual reality is part of a statewide and even national trend. Danville Public Libraries do not have any virtual reality headsets.

Both Rogers and Varga explained libraries are always trying to grow and change to better meet the needs of the public. Varga cited the example of libraries shifting from renting the now-outdated VHS movies to the replacement DVDs to now offering movies to stream online.

“Something that’s very important to libraries is that we evolve with our users,” Varga said.

Added Rogers: “Libraries aren’t just about books anymore.”

While each of the four county library branches — Gretna, Mount Hermon, Chatham and Brosville/Cascade — received two headsets in May and implemented them as part of their summer reading programs, programming since then has been up to the individual branches' discretion and comfort level, Tuite said. The Brosville/Cascade branch has made the most of the headsets, downloading programs and promoting the service, as well as receiving two additional headsets.

Rogers has also jumped into the realm of virtual reality, vetting and downloading a wide variety of educational programs, as well as games for the headsets at the Brosville/Cascade branch. He also started Virtual Reality Tuesday, where anyone can come and use one of the four headsets at the branch.

The Brosville/Cascade branch offers a variety of educational experiences such as a tour of the international space station — as well as such games as snowball and zombie fights.

Heather Garrett, mother of Maddie Garrett, a student Brosville Elementary School, and Logan Garrett, who attends Tunstall Middle School, has brought her children to almost every single Virtual Reality Tuesday during the past several months.

“Having fun activities at the library was the perfect way to get them out of the house and have something fun and interactive to do,” she said.

Logan Garrett enjoys playing lots of the shooting and racing games, while the Maddie Garrett enjoys more of the magic games.

One of the most recent programs obtained by the branch is a virtual, guided tour of the secret annex where Anne Frank and her family lived and hid for more than two years during the Holocaust. Inside of a headset, viewers can move around the actual house in Amsterdam, Netherlands, hear explanations of certain items and parts of the annex and listen to excerpts from Anne Frank's diary.

“I thought the Anne Frank experience was really neat,” said Heather Garrett, as both her and Maddie Garrett have explored the house.

“It’s one thing to see a picture in a book ... but to actually walk around in a historical room ... it makes it much more real,” Rogers added.

People can also go to the library to enjoy virtual reality at any time and area teachers can even make appointments to bring their students.

Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.

# In simulated shooting, agencies move to 'tactical style of emergency medicine'

By Caleb Ayers cayers@registerbee.com Oct 11, 2019



Detective Jonathan Masi, of the Danville Police Department, leads a group of paramedics and EMS personnel into Galileo Magnet High School as part of an active shooter drill Friday afternoon. More than 10 different entities collaborated and worked together to plan and run the drill, which had been in the works for a year.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

The first few shots rang out at 2 p.m. Friday.

Another boom came from the gun at 2:02, by which point dispatch was warning of an active shooter — but drill — situation at Galileo Magnet High School.

At 2:08, the first police car arrived — an SUV with two officers. They entered the building together, one wielding a handgun and the other an assault rifle. Shortly after their entrance, a series of shots went off inside.

Over the next hour, more police officers continued to arrive and enter the school while other law enforcement officials from multiple departments set up a command post in the middle of South Ridge Street, which runs in front of the school. Led by an armed detective, a team of paramedics repeatedly rushed into the school and emerged carrying a gunshot victim.

Groups of people periodically walked out of the front door with their hands raised above their heads.

But the victims hadn't actually been shot, and no students even were in the school. The entire process was part of an active shooter drill, proposed and organized by the Danville Public Schools, and included a host of other departments.

In a briefing before the drill began, officials from the Danville police and fire departments, the Danville Life Saving Crew and Danville Public Schools explained some of rationale behind the event.

Danville Police Chief Scott Booth said while they hope an active shooter situation never happens in Danville schools, law enforcement needs to be ready if it does.

“To be successful, we have to prepare,” Booth said.

“We want to make it as real as we can make it for today,” added William Chaney, director of safety and security for Danville Public Schools.

As the different groups have been working together in preparation for this event during the past year, they have changed approach and strategies several times, said Bryan Fox, executive director of the Danville Life Saving Crew. In other mass, active shooting situations, Fox said law enforcement often focused on neutralizing the threat before bringing in paramedics, but during the drill they sent paramedics into the danger zone to extract the injured.

“We’ve gone more to a tactical style of emergency medicine ... this is going to be a task of stopping the killing, stopping the dying, starting the recovery,” he said.

In addition to practicing and improving those strategies, Booth said one of the main goals of the drill was to improve collaboration between the different agencies.

“First and foremost I want to see strong communication among partners,” he said.

“This is one of those things that none of us really want to do, but it’s something we need to do. It gives us an opportunity to test our capabilities as agencies in cooperating through a crisis,” said Stanley Jones, superintendent of Danville Public Schools.

In the time leading up to the drill, Booth said many people were anxious, both because it was something new and because it made them consider the possibility of an active shooter event actually happening.

Students were not at school during the day Friday. Barricades were set up for several hours at several intersections surrounding the school, which only were opened for first responders coming to the scene.

Officials said they will spend some time analyzing their collective response before they implement any changes or new strategies.

Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.

Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.



Photos: Active shooter drill in Danville  
Oct 11, 2019

### The agencies

Agencies involved with Friday's drill include:

- Danville Public Schools
- Danville Police Department
- Danville Fire Department
- Danville Life Saving Crew
- Danville Sheriff's Office
- Sovah Health-Danville
- Virginia State Police
- Danville Commonwealth's Attorney's Office



- Department of Criminal Justice Services
- Pittsylvania County Sheriff's Office
- Pittsylvania County Emergency Management

# Shifting motives: Home schooling becoming more mainstream across state

By Caleb Ayers [cayers@registerbee.com](mailto:cayers@registerbee.com) Oct 29, 2019



Oliver Martin, 5, attempts to catch one of the many chickens that his family has on their property. A homeschooled kindergarten student, Oliver has a vivid imagination and quickly jumps from one thing to the next, attributes that are well-suited for the flexibility of home schooling, said his mother Jessica Martin.

Caleb Ayers/Register & Bee

---

By Caleb Ayers

[cayers@registerbee.com](mailto:cayers@registerbee.com)

The routine varies from day to day for home-schooled student 5-year-old Oliver Martin.

He usually starts the day by completing his morning chores with the animals — the family has more than a dozen chickens, two dogs and three bunnies — before moving on to his yoga routine.

For school, Oliver, a boy with a vivid imagination who prefers to jump quickly from one activity or subject to the next, spends lots of times reading books and learning about science through hands-on activities and YouTube videos, all activities that his mother, Amber Martin, described as part of a natural learning style.

“I’m able to kind of expand on what he’s interested in so that he enjoys learning,” she said.

While Martin said they are religious — and actually are using a religious curriculum this year for Oliver’s kindergarten — their beliefs did not play a part in the decision to home-school. For Martin, it’s about freedom and flexibility.

“We can fit school into our lives rather than trying to fit our lives around school,” she said.

The Martins are part of a growing segment of the home-schooled community that decided against public education for purely academic reasons.

“Home schooling has become more mainstream, so people are no longer reluctant to home-school when they realize that public schools aren’t best for their children,” said Scott Woodruff, senior counsel for the Purcellville-based Home School Legal Defense Association.

During the past five years, the number of home-schooled students statewide has seen a 12% increase from nearly 39,000 in the 2013-2014 school year to 43,505 during the 2018-2019 school year, data from the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) shows.

In Pittsylvania County, VDOE data shows much slower growth rate of nearly 7% during the past five years, shifting from 379 home-schooled students in the 2013-14 year to 447 total home-schoolers during the 2018-19 school year. This slight stagnation comes after a nearly 25% jump from 283 to 349 students between the 2010-11 and 2012-13 school years.

Even though the numbers aren't changing drastically, area home-schoolers report an increase in both non-religious home-schoolers and religious families who don't home school for religious reasons — like the Martins.

The increase in popularity for home schooling can be at least partially attributed to the diminishing barriers of entry and the fact it's becoming a more mainstream option.

“It's not that people of faith are home-schooling less; it's that parents who aren't strongly motivated by faith find it much more comfortable to switch to home schooling,” Woodruff said.

He added that the increasing number of quality, affordable — and sometimes even free — academic materials and curriculum, as well as the relaxation of state regulations, have also contributed to the increase.

In Pittsylvania County, many of the home-school families have at least some religious motive, but that is often secondary, said Jessica Austin, a co-leader of Christian Homes Educating Children, a support group for home-schoolers with upward of 70 members in Danville and Pittsylvania County.

“Most of the people that have joined our group... it's mainly because the school was not meeting their kids' needs academically,” she said. “The rise in our group is because of the academic.”

Many of those, she added, have disabilities or have been the victim of bullying in the school system.

For those who choose to home-school in Virginia, they have two options for filing with their local school board: home instruction or religious exemption. With home instruction, the family is responsible for providing annual evidence of achievement and progress to the local school board, whereas families who file under religious exemption are not subject to compulsory education statutes.

With religious exemption “there is no reporting between the household and the local school division,” said Charles Pyle, spokesperson for the Virginia Department of Education.

Statewide, roughly 70% file home instruction while the other 30% file religious exemption, said Woodruff. In Pittsylvania County for the 2018-19 school year, 287 students were under home instruction while another 160 were under religious exemption, basically matching that 70/30 ratio.

Austin, who started home schooling her children, Riley and Aubrey, now in second and fourth grades, respectively, to provide “a Christ-centered education,” files religious exemption. But her religious beliefs weren’t her only motivation. She doesn’t want her kids to be severely bullied like her brother was in school.

They often start school around 10 a.m., and her kids, working independently through much of the material in their books, often finish in four or five hours. While they don’t attend classes outside of the home, they participate in a variety of activities and field trips through the support group.

“They can still have all those social engagements and social activities that public-schoolers have,” she said.

State data shows that statewide the number of religious exemptions claimed has barely changed over the past five academic years, while the number of students who are filed under home instruction has increased 15%, from 32,314 to 36,984.

And not all families who home-school for religious reasons file religious exemptions. For instance, David and Marni Lyle began home schooling with primarily religious intent, but they file under home instruction. They have been home schooling since their first daughter entered kindergarten, and now have a home-school graduate, as well as kids in 11th, ninth and sixth grades.

Attending classes at least once a week with other home-school students, as well as doing some online courses in addition to their book work, Holly, Aubrey and Grady Lyle keep busy with a variety of school work and activities, much of which they do at the kitchen table or in the living room of their Chatham home.

“I like finishing at my own time,” Aubrey Lyle, 15, said of home schooling.

For David and Marni Lyle, they've learned as they changed their strategies and tactics plenty over the years. Throughout it all, they feel good about the close family relationships that home schooling has allowed them to have.

"I don't always like [home schooling], but I like the fruit that comes out of it," said Marni Lyle.

Amber Martin, who worked as an occupational therapist in a New York public school before moving to Virginia, decided to home-school her son to avoid the early focus on testing, milestones and standards in the public school system. She has made math and language arts two of the major focuses for her son's kindergarten year, but next year she will begin to add more structure in other subjects.

"I didn't want him to learn to hate learning," she said.

Oliver Martin also participates in a wide variety of activities with other local home-schoolers through programs at Averett University, a physical education class in Martinsville and activities with Christian Homes Educating Children.

In the years to come, Amber Martin sees the long-term benefits of continuing to home-school, but that is something that she will tackle on a year-by-year basis.

"My intent is to do whatever is best for him," she said.

Ayers reports for the Register & Bee. Reach him at (434) 791-7981.