

Findings



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Preservation of the Family

Homeschools

The Growth and Success of Home Education

By Stephen Daniels

It wasn't long ago that parents who chose to educate their children at home were met with skepticism and concern. Though some of this may still exist in certain circles, much of the stigma against home education has been lifted as evidence of its success mounts. Today, home education has entered the mainstream to become one of many viable educational options for families.

This paper will take a closer look at the growing homeschool movement and how it has fared over the last several years. It will include an examination of the academic performance of these students and the socialization they receive. It will also address the best approach for policymakers to take when considering the needs of homeschooling families.

History

Though many consider homeschooling to be a fairly new method of instruction, it is actually one of the oldest. Homeschooling was widespread in North America until the 1870s, when institutionalized schooling and compulsory attendance became the norm.^{B1} Many historical figures were homeschooled including Presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and other notables such as Thomas Edison, Booker T. Washington and Mark Twain.^{B2} Homeschooling reentered the picture in limited forms in the 1960s, but did not gain acceptance until years later. It was not until 1993 that homeschools were legalized in all 50 states.^{B3}

In North Carolina, homeschooling was legalized in 1985 when the state Supreme Court ruled that it met all the standards to qualify as a nonpublic school under state law.^{B4} Subsequent to that, the North Carolina General Assembly passed legisla-

tion in 1988, which added a section on homeschools to the nonpublic education statutes.^{B5} Since that time, the number of North Carolina families choosing to home educate has increased dramatically.

A Growing Movement

Homeschools are not only more common in America today than they were a few decades ago, but they are also increasing at an astounding rate. In 1985, there were only around 50,000 children being educated at home in the United States.^{A1} Now, the U.S. Department of Education

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estimates that in 1999 there were approximately 850,000 students being homeschooled nationwide (or 1.7 percent of all students ages 5 to 17).^{A2} However, the National Home Education Research Institute estimates the real number to be somewhere between 1.5 and 1.9 million students.^{A3} The growth in the number of homeschoolers in North Carolina is equally impressive. In 1985, it was estimated that there were 809 students enrolled in 381 homeschools statewide.^{A4} According to the 2001-2002 enrollment numbers, there were 46,909 students enrolled in 23,909 homeschools in North Carolina.^{A5} However, it is certain that this is a low estimate because state law does not require the registration of students under the age of seven.^{A5a} No matter what the precise figure, it is clear that homeschooling is a growing fixture in today's education landscape.

Homeschoolers are not just increasing in

numbers, but in political influence as well. The homeschool movement has an established infrastructure of well-informed and active parents who are ready and willing to take action when necessary. In one instance, Congress was flooded with over half a million communications from concerned homeschoolers who opposed an amendment to the 1994 Elementary and Secondary Education Act. As a result of that action, the disputed amendment was not only defeated by a vote of 424 to 1, but statutory language was added to clarify that the bill did not pertain to homeschools.^{A8}

In North Carolina, homeschooling families rallied to get a bill passed to grant them official recognition in state law. As a result of their efforts, a bill was passed that was considered largely favorable to homeschoolers, despite strong opposition from large and well-funded lobbying groups.^{A9} During that time, legislators remarked that the amount of communications from homeschooling families was more than they had seen from anyone on any other issue.^{A10}

As a growing movement whose presence is no longer easy to ignore, homeschooling has established itself as a force to be reckoned with, not only in size, but in influence too. So who are these people that choose to educate their children at home, and why have they chosen to do it?

Who Homeschools and Why

With the number of homeschoolers increasing each year, the description of the typical homeschooling family continues to expand. The stereotypical image of a conservative Christian family being the only type of homeschooling family does not accurately reflect the growing diversity among home educators. Though a large number of these families do fit this category, many other families from a broad range of ideologies and motivations are

among the growing number of homeschools.^w

As for the demographics of these families, research offers some insight into the characteristics of those who choose to homeschool. A 1998 survey of over 20,000 homeschooled students found that homeschooling families differed in some ways from the general population. The study, which was conducted by Lawrence Rudner of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, made the following conclusions: 1) the large majority (97 percent) of homeschool students are in married couple families; 2) homeschool students are in larger families; 3) homeschool parents have more formal education than the general population; 4) on average, homeschool families have a higher income than the median income for families with children.^{w1}

Research done by the U.S. Department of Education confirmed many of the findings of the Rudner study, though their research found no significant difference between the household income of homeschoolers and nonhomeschoolers.^{w2} They did find that a greater percentage of homeschoolers were white (75 percent) compared to the nationwide student population (65 percent).^{w3} However, this number may not accurately reflect the growing number of black families choosing to homeschool. According to the National Home Educators Research Institute, blacks make up around five percent, or 85,000 homeschooling students—almost 10 times the number reported by the government.^{w4}

As to the reasons why families choose to homeschool, the U.S. Department of Education's survey found a broad range of responses. Interestingly, the top reason for homeschooling was not religious. Instead, most respondents (48.9 percent) indicated that they homeschool because they can give their child a better education at home. That was followed by religious reasons (38.4 percent), poor learning environment at school (25.6), family reasons (16.8 percent), to develop character/morality (15.1) and others.^{w5} The large percentage of homeschooling parents motivated by a desire to offer a better education to their children reflects the steady decline in confidence in the public school system that has been occurring over the last several decades.^{w6}

For many parents, home education is the best solution for providing their child with a good, quality education. And as the following data will show, it appears that many are having great success.

Academic Performance

Recent attention has been focusing on the achievements of homeschoolers as a growing number of these students participate and excel in national education events. One example is the National Spelling Bee where the top three finalists in 2000 were all taught at home (the winner placed second in the National Geography Bee the week before).^{p1} Homeschoolers dominated the event the following year, gaining the top spot and representing over 10 percent of the 248 participants.^{p2} And in 2002, homeschoolers accounted for four of the top-10 finishers in the event, one of whom was the winner.^{p3}

These events have helped to draw attention to the success of a few homeschoolers, but what about the vast

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majority of these students? Research shows that homeschooled students tend to rate higher in a broad range of academic measurements. Take, for example, achievement test scores. In one study, which used the Iowa Tests of Basic Skill (ITBS) and the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency (TAP), the median scores for homeschooled students were higher than public and private school students in every subject and in every grade, with most of their grades between the 75th and 85th percentile.^{p4} For example, the median composite scaled score for homeschooled students in the sixth grade was 261, which corresponds to the 81st percentile nationwide. This means that the median homeschooled sixth grade student outperforms 81 percent of sixth graders nationwide.^{p5}

Similar results were found among college entrance exams, including the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the American College Test (ACT). Homeschooling students continue to outperform public and private school students on the ACT with scores above the national average year after year.^{p5a} In addition, homeschoolers also have a higher average score on the SAT.^{p6}

Homeschooled students also advance

through grade level instructional material more quickly with about one fourth of all homeschooled children enrolled one or more grade levels above their public and private school peers.^{p7} On achievement tests, the average homeschooling students in the first through fourth grade perform a full grade level above public and private school students. By the eighth grade, the average homeschooling students perform four grade levels above the national average.^{p8}

Further evidence of the increasing academic clout of homeschoolers is the growing number of colleges not only accepting, but pursuing these students for admission. It is estimated that over one million homeschooled students will enter college in the next decade.^{p8a1} Over 700 colleges and universities have admitted homeschooled students including Harvard University, Yale University, Stanford University and the Citadel.^{p8b} Homeschoolers are enrolled in 19 of the top 20 national universities in the country.^{p9} In 2000, Stanford University admitted nine of the 36 homeschool applicants, a 25 percent acceptance rate that is twice the normal rate.^{p11} Admissions officers, such as those at Harvard University, attend homeschool conferences looking for applicants, while others actively recruit these students because of their academic success.^{p10}

Most colleges have policies for working with homeschool applicants, though many still lack clear criteria. And with the growing influx of applications from homeschooled students, colleges will be forced to take a second look at their admissions procedures.

Socialization

Perhaps the most common concern raised about homeschooling is the issue of whether or not students receive adequate "socialization." It is often assumed that homeschooled students are learning in isolation, apart from peer relationships, and as a result are less prepared to function in social settings, particularly with children their own age. This perception is often reinforced by popular culture's portrayal of homeschooling students. For example, a major retailer sold a t-shirt featuring a broken down mobile home and the words "Home Skooled" across the front (the shirt was later pulled after scores of shoppers protested).^{s1} Meanwhile, a half-hour sitcom portrays a homeschooling family with eccentric parents whose bright children can speak six languages, but cannot communicate with other kids their age.^{s2}

Such depictions reflect the common misperceptions about homeschoolers.

However, they are in stark contrast to what the average homeschooler is really like. Most homeschooled students are not the socially inept “nerds” that the media often portrays. In reality, research shows that homeschool students are well adjusted, active and sociable people. They score as high on self-esteem and adaptability tests as public school students do.⁵³ They also tend to have fewer behavioral problems, and are more mature than their peers.⁵⁴

As to the isolation, research shows that 98 percent of homeschooled students are involved in two or more types of extracurricular activity—with the average student regularly involved in at least five activities including music and dance classes, group sports, volunteer work, Bible clubs and many more.⁵⁵ And with the flexibility offered to homeschooling families, students frequently take daytime field trips to museums, parks and other educational destinations. Some students even make use of public school resources such as books and materials, curriculum and extracurricular activities.⁵⁶

Homeschool families are also linked to other families through associations and networks of other families. Through these groups, they are able to pool resources and even share some responsibilities through study groups and sports teams. Even social events such as proms and graduations have been organized.⁵⁸

These activities give homeschoolers the chance to regularly interact with kids their own age, but also with adults and children of other ages too. Many homeschooling parents prefer the wider range of social interaction, because it gives their children exposure to multiple peer groups—something that traditional schools normally cannot do. As a result, these children tend to be able to get along with children of different ages and to better relate with adults.⁵⁹

One measure of the successful socialization of homeschoolers is their performance in college settings. When asked how homeschoolers do at his school, Harvard University’s director of admissions said “The homeschooled students at Harvard are indistinguishable from the other students. They are all high caliber individuals. They are highly motivated, excel academically and have no unusual problems adapting to college life.”⁶¹ Evidence from other colleges supports this claim along with other research that has found homeschooled students to be performing well in a wide variety of college success measures.⁶²

Concerns about the socialization of

homeschooled children are unwarranted. In fact, it is exactly the kind of socialization that homeschooling allows that makes it so appealing to parents. Instead of dealing with the unhealthy peer pressures, violence, overcrowding and distractions that are often associated with traditional schools, these children learn in an environment that is void of so many of the negative experiences that can actually lead to lower self-esteem and poor social skills.⁶⁰

An Option to Protect

Homeschooling is a credible alternative for many parents who want to offer their children the best education that they can. Obviously, home education is not an option for everyone. But with research mounting about the academic success of these students, it is evident that many families have found a method that works very well for them.

Its success is underscored by the fact that most home educating parents have not been professionally trained or certified as teachers.⁶¹ Equally amazing is the low cost at which this education is conducted. In fact, the average amount of money spent to homeschool a child annually is around \$546 (the median cost is around \$400)⁶²—much less than the \$6,654.10 annual cost to educate a public school student in North Carolina.⁶³ This is impressive, considering that homeschooled students outperform public school students in every subject and in every grade at a fraction of the cost.

For policymakers, this raises an important point—homeschooling is working and the families choosing to educate at home are doing so without government assistance or resources. Parents who choose to homeschool are sacrificing a great deal of time and money to teach their children at home. Many forgo careers, activities and income to take on this role. Such sacrifice is clear evidence of the dedication and seriousness with which these parents take their role in educating their child. After all, they are the ones with the most vested interest in seeing their child succeed.

Lawmakers must always uphold the preeminent right of parents to do what is in the best interest of their child, including the decision about what type of education is best for them. For homeschoolers, this means protecting their freedom to homeschool without the burden of excess laws and regulations.

Though homeschooling has been legalized in all 50 states, restrictions vary in each state regarding the flexibility that

parents have. In North Carolina, state law allows homeschoolers the freedom and flexibility to teach while still giving the state oversight. Lawmakers and regulators will help to preserve an effective educational option, as well as continue to preserve the vital rights of parents by keeping it that way.

Requirements to Open a Home School in N.C.

Parents/guardians residing in North Carolina and desiring, in lieu of conventional school attendance, to home school their children who are at least age 7 but not yet age 16 must:

- Send to the Division of Non-Public Education (DNPE) a Notice of Intent to Operate a School. The notice must include the name and address of the school along with the name of the school’s owner and chief administrator;
- Hold at least a high school diploma or its equivalent.
- Elect to operate under either Part 1 or Part 2 of Article 39 of the North Carolina General Statutes as a religious or as a non-religious school.
- Operate the school “on a regular schedule, excluding reasonable holidays and vacations, during at least nine calendar months of the year.”
- Maintain at the school disease immunization and annual attendance records for each student.
- Have a nationally standardized achievement test administered annually to each student. The test must involve the subject areas of English grammar, reading, spelling, and mathematics. Records of the test results must be retained at the school for at least one year and made available to DNPE when requested.
- Notify DNPE when the school is no longer in operation.

Source: Home School Information Packet. Provided by the N.C. Division of Non-Public Education.

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Organized in 1992, the North Carolina Family Policy Council is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, research and education organization. Our goal is to serve as a voice for families and traditional family values in the public policy arena. We are supported solely by private contributions which are tax deductible as provided by law. Our mailing address is P.O. Box 20607, Raleigh, NC 27619. Phone: (919) 807-0800. Fax: (919) 807-0900. *Findings* is a publication of the North Carolina Family Policy Council which is intended to communicate research findings and perspectives on public policy issues that affect the family. Nothing written here should be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the North Carolina Family Policy Council or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress or the North Carolina General Assembly. Printed April 2003.