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# **An Empirical Study on Factors Influencing Parents' School Choice**

*Paul M. Ajuwon, Ph.D. and Brenda K. Bradshaw, Ph.D.*

## **Introduction**

Parent-directed initiatives at educating their children at home have engaged the attention of families and educators since the 1980s. Americans are embracing homeschooling over public and private schooling in a bid to preserve their children's religious, cultural, and family values. A report conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that there was an increase in homeschooled students in the United States from 850,000 students in the spring of 1999 (1.7 percent of the total student population) to 1.1 million students in the spring of 2003 (2.2 percent of the total student population) to 1.5 million students in the spring of 2007 (2.9 percent of the total student population).<sup>1</sup> In another study, the Oregon-based National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) estimated that 1.9 to 2.4 million children were home schooled during 2005-2006.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in various communities across the country, home schooling has become a recognized option for parents who wish to provide for their children a quality education, religious training or social environment that they believe is nonexistent in public or private schools.

Early in a child's life, most parents become preoccupied with the pervasive concern of the type of school choice for the child. Outcomes of empirical studies point to parent choice of home schooling as a viable alternative for shaping children into adults that parents would like them to become. These parents, like early proponents of home education, have argued that home education should not be seen as an attempt to bring the formal school construct into the home. Rather, they perceive home schooling as a natural, experiential feature of life that occurs as the members of the household are involved with one another in daily living and functioning.

Several studies have documented the popularity of home schooling in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Despite its widespread appeal in different communities, home schooling has been a controversial and thought-provoking topic. Critics posit that home schooling hinders children from developing social rela-

tionships with peers as are generally noticeable in typical public or private schools. However, some parents believe home schooling does not deter social relationships, and maintain that the many advantages of home schooling far outweigh any skepticism that exists with socialization. These proponents maintain that home schoolers today have a variety of activities and opportunities for their children and families including, but not limited to: sports, band, geography bees, debate, spontaneous neighborhood games, co-ops, scouts, and religious activities. Further, the amount and diversity of extracurricular offerings has grown immensely as more public schools continue to accommodate the social and recreational needs of home schooling families within their boundaries. Thus, for some, such extracurricular activities enable home schoolers to socialize with other children.<sup>4</sup> In the assessment of one parent who practices home schooling: "The children develop friendships and function like a community because they spend so much time together and are forced to work on their differences."<sup>5</sup>

Home schoolers today are found in various religious, racial, ethnic and economic groups, with the typical American home schooling parents being white, married, with three or more children, and a stay-at-home mother. Perhaps, the question that should be posed at this juncture is: Why do more and more parents choose home schooling for their children? There are multiple reasons why parents gravitate toward home schooling. Some of the most prevalent reasons cited in the literature include: to propagate religious beliefs,<sup>6</sup> to instill character and morality in children,<sup>7</sup> to enhance quality of education, especially at elementary and secondary levels,<sup>8</sup> to get away from an impoverished school environment,<sup>9</sup> and to sustain family values.<sup>10</sup> By far, religion is generally cited as one of the top reasons for home schooling children.<sup>11</sup>

In a study conducted by the US Department of Education, it was found that out of 1,000,000 parents surveyed, nearly 30% chose home schooling primarily because of their desire to provide religious and moral instruction to their children.<sup>12</sup> In an earlier study by LaRue, as cited by Pearson,<sup>13</sup> 86% of parents surveyed identified religion as one of the reasons they chose to home school. LaRue also reported that parents felt their children did not obtain moral and ethical instruction at school.

Closely related to the foregoing is the issue of religious indoctrination which has been seen as a powerful influence on a parent's choice to home school. Such indoctrination may be conscious or unconscious, purposeful or devoid of inquiry. "In the early stages of education the powers and capacities of the child are not very developed; and it is here especially that the vulnerability to indoctrination is greatest."<sup>14</sup> On the basis of this, many

parents object to teachers or peers instilling religious beliefs in their children; hence the choice to home school their children in an environment where they can exert full control over religious values. These parents "have a desire to control the content of their child's education so it is consistent with spiritual or religious beliefs."<sup>15</sup>

However, an aspect of the curriculum that has come under direct fire is the teaching of human origins. Nord maintained that a good liberal education should introduce students to the major ways humankind has developed.<sup>16</sup> According to him, such education should give students the perspective to think critically about fundamental issues of science, religion and education and provide them with the analytical knowledge to interpret events they experience on a day-to-day basis. To do otherwise, according to Nord, would be tantamount to indoctrination and marginalization. Therefore, in Nord's views, students need to be initiated into a critical conversation about the nature and possible limits of science and about its relationship to various religious traditions.

Instilling good character/morality in children has been identified as another strong motivation for home schooling.<sup>17</sup> However, one of the biggest myths surrounding morality is that moral intelligence develops naturally.<sup>18</sup> "Too often parents assume these habits develop naturally . . . . To ensure kids acquire strong moral habits and beliefs, parents must intentionally model, reinforce, and teach the virtues and habits comprising Moral IQ."<sup>19</sup> Further, Borba argues that morals can be learned and parents are the most powerful moral instructors, not teachers.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, many of these parents feel that home schooling is the best way to instill good moral values while simultaneously educating their children.

Quality of education is yet another important driving force for parents who practice home schooling.<sup>21</sup> Some parents believe that their children are not sufficiently challenged by programs in public schools. Studies have shown that an upwards of 27 million illiterate children have graduated from public schools in recent years.<sup>22</sup> According to the National Assessment of Academic Progress,<sup>23</sup> 20% of students who graduate from high school are classified as illiterate. This grim statistic persists in spite of the fact that America represents one of the most advanced economies in the world today, expending approximately 10 billion dollars annually to combat illiteracy. Yet, the current accountability movement under the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) requires of these children in the nation's public schools to demonstrate high scores on achievement tests.<sup>24</sup> Ironically, children who are home schooled have been found to score higher on such achievement tests<sup>25</sup>

because of low student-to-teacher ratios, parents spending more time with their children and advancing technologies - all of which have proven to be critical factors in home schooling success.<sup>26</sup>

Many parents perceive a good environment as a prerequisite to quality education. By implication, this means creating an environment for learning that is devoid of violence, drugs, bullying, and teasing - all of which have led some advocates to abandon public school education in favor of teaching their children at home. Indeed, parents' fears of violence and drugs in public schools are increasing, and this has led to a rise in the number of children who are being home schooled.<sup>27</sup> These parents do not want their children in an environment which is characterized by violence, promiscuity and defiance of authority.<sup>28</sup>

In recent years, mainstream Americans have also expressed apprehensions regarding Islam and its followers. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, about 36% of Americans say the Islamic religion is more likely to encourage violence among its followers.<sup>29</sup> The Council on American-Islamic Relations stated that 6.93% of reported anti-Muslim incidents occurred in school settings, and it is probable that such incidents may be underreported.<sup>30</sup> These statistics, in part, point to the scrutiny that Muslim-Americans have experienced since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. 9/11 has created problems that have been compounded by increasing islamophobia or an irrational fear or prejudice toward Muslims or people who may appear to be Muslim.<sup>31</sup> Thus, many parents of Islamic faith now choose to home school their children, making them the fastest growing segment in the American home school movement.<sup>32</sup> To these proponents, it is anticipated that home schooling will afford them the opportunity to "build a solid Muslim identity away from the prejudices that their children, boys and girls alike, can face in schoolyards."<sup>33</sup>

Finally, family values have been found to play an important role in the decision-making process for home schooling children. Since families who choose to home school come from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, the family values that shape their decision to home school are also diverse. In fact, family values may include, but are not limited to: having a large number of children in one household, living in a rural or remote area, practicing a lifestyle of freedom and holism, the presence of a special needs child within the family, disagreement with the practice of teaching sensitive topics such as sex, questioning authority and secular religion in public schools, and the threats posed by public or private schools.<sup>34</sup>

## **The Present Study**

Two main reasons provided the impetus for the present investigation. First, the authors, who live and work in Southwest Missouri, a region popularly dubbed the “Bible Belt,” have for some years observed the growing popularity of home schooling among parents in the region. Over the past decade, Christian influence in the Southwest Missouri public schools has seemed to weaken. For example, one author noticed that in a particular school, the “Jesus Loves You” screen savers in a computer lab was changed to “You are Loved” when a new principal was hired. The former principal had also held regular prayer meetings and “laying on of hands” as a form of intervention for problem children in the school office. The new principal enforced separation of church and state laws to the school.

Second, the authors, who are educators themselves, embarked on the study using national data which revealed religion to be a major factor in the evolution of learning environments other than traditional forms of schooling for children. Thus, we sought to examine religion as a focal point of parent choice. Specifically then, the purpose of the research was to identify and analyze all of the factors (including religion) that influence parents on choice of school setting in Southwest Missouri. To meet the above-mentioned objective, the authors formulated the research questions that follow:

1. What are the most important reasons parents have for home schooling their children?
2. What are the most important reasons parents cite for not choosing public schools?
3. What are the most important reasons parents cite for not choosing private schools?
4. How do the reasons identified above vary by selected demographic characteristics?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The researchers obtained names of potential participants through personal contact with local private (academic and parochial) schools, home school organizations, and community groups. Care was given to represent equally the three primary school setting choices of public, private, and home

schools. The questionnaire was mailed to 500 parents in southwest Missouri during the summer of 2007. 116 surveys representing 250 children (23 %) were returned.

### *The Instrument*

Using national survey data,<sup>35</sup> the authors developed a questionnaire for the study. The purpose of the research was to assess parents' perceptions and experiences with choice of school for their children (including those with disabilities) in any type of home, private or public schools in Southwest Missouri. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. Section 1, entitled "Background Information on Your Family" included such information as: number of children in each household, their age, gender, language(s) spoken, type of schooling of the children, and if there are any disabilities associated with the children. The authors also sought information on the primary decision-maker regarding the type of schooling chosen for the children, the age, gender and race/ethnicity of parent, as well as the specific religious identity/faith of the parent. Each respondent was also asked to indicate their highest level of education, the current combined annual income of each household, and whether any of the children have changed schools or experienced multiple types of schooling, and the reason(s) for changing schools. Finally, because of the influence the health condition of parents might exert on school choice, respondents were asked to indicate any health limitations or physical conditions which prevent each parent from engaging in physical activities.

Section 2 of the survey was entitled "Experiences with Chosen Type of Schooling." Here, parents were asked to rate 16 criteria pertaining to the type of schooling (public, private or home). The 16 criteria were chosen by synthesizing criteria used in other national surveys. Next, parents were asked how much of a role religion should play in the education of school-aged children in public schools, and if children enrolled in private or homeschools participate in public school programs. Parents were asked to list the primary reason for choosing the current type of schooling, the primary reasons they did not choose the other two types of schooling, how well they think the current school setting is meeting the learning needs of their children (including those with special needs), the specific successes or challenges they have had in their current type of schooling, and if they have any plans to change any of their children's type of schooling in the future. There were questions on parents' views on vouchers to pay for costs in the school of choice, and if they feel the current school setting is providing their children a quality education, or is free of alcohol, drugs, bullying and teasing.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to indicate if the current school setting gives them control of the education of their children, and if they find it convenient to transport their children to and from their chosen school. The last item in this section was open-ended to generate additional comments from study participants.

### *Results*

116 surveys representing 250 children (23%) were returned. In Section 1 of the survey, parents were asked to identify the type of schooling chosen for their children (public, private, home). 52.6% of parents, a majority of those surveyed, chose public schooling, 31% chose private schooling, and 13.8% chose home schooling. 2.6% of parents did not respond. 78.4% of parents who filled out the survey were female. 50.9% of parents reported that the decision regarding school choice was joint between the father and the mother, whereas 36.2% of parents reported that the father was the primary decision-maker. Another 12.9% reported that the mother was the primary decision-maker.

Parents were then asked to identify the type of schooling each of the parents in the household experienced as children. The results are presented in Table 1. The majority of parents experienced public schooling, with Parent 1 reporting at 83.6% and Parent 2 at 66.4%. Much fewer parents experienced private schooling, with Parent 1 reporting at 2.6% and Parent 2 slightly higher at 10.3%. Some parents reported experiencing both public and private schooling, with Parent 1 at 9.5% and Parent 2 at 10.3%. No parent reported experiencing home schooling exclusively. However, 0.9% in Parent 2 category reported experiencing a combination of private and home schooling.

**Table 1:** *Parents' Type of Schooling*

	Public	Private	Public/Private	Private/Home
<b>Parent 1</b>	83.60%	2.60%	9.50%	0%
<b>Parent 2</b>	66.40%	10.30%	10.30%	0.90%

The racial/ethnic backgrounds of each parent are reported in Table 2. The majority of respondents (87.1% of Parent 1, and 81.9% of Parent 2) were Caucasian, which aligns with regional demographics. Much lower



numbers of African Americans participated in the survey, with Parent 1 and Parent 2 reporting at 6.9%. Few parents reported Asian, Hispanic, or Native American backgrounds. Parent 1 and Parent 2 reported 1.7% and 0.9% Asian background, respectively. Parent 2 reported 1.7% Hispanic background, and Parent 1 reported 0.9% Native American background.

**Table 2:** *Racial/ethnic backgrounds of each parent in household*

	Caucasian	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Native American
Parent 1	87.10%	6.90%	1.70%	0%	0.90%
Parent 2	81.90%	6.90%	0.90%	1.70%	0%

Parents were asked to report on their specific religious identity, with only one religion reported for each household. Protestant Christian households were in the majority at 65.5%, with an additional 9.5% being specifically Assemblies of God, and 2.6% Mormon. Catholics reported in at 11.2%, bringing the combined Christian total to 88.8%. 0.9% of parents reported being Jewish, the same percentage as Muslim. 4.3% reported no religious identity, 2.6% reported “other,” and 2.6% gave no response.

The combined annual income of each household was reported with 37.9% of households indicating between \$51,000 and \$100,000. 29.3% of households reported \$21,000 to \$50,000 annually. 24.1% reported over \$100,000, whereas only 6% reported annual household incomes of under \$21,000. 2.6% gave no response.

43.2% of parents reported having moved their children from one setting to another at least once, and 56.8% of parents have chosen for their children to remain in same school setting.

On Section 2 of the survey, Parents were asked to report their experiences with the type of schooling chosen for their children. First, they were asked which type of schooling (public, private, or home), in their opinion and experience, best provides opportunities for children in kindergarten through eighth grade, then high school. Table 3 represents results for grades kindergarten through 8. High school data is very similar. In general, home school settings received the highest ratings, followed by private schools, then public schools.

**Table 3:** *Parents' experiences with types of schooling*

	Public	Private	Home
Optimal Learning Experiences	25%	44%	24%
Curricular Offerings	44	30.2	17.2
Flexibility with Family Schedule	17.2	17.2	56.9
Appropriate Social Atmosphere	29.3	39.7	18.1
Teaches Civic Responsibility	26.7	38.8	24.1
Quality Teachers	29.3	35.3	16.4
Effective Teaching Methods	30.2	31	24.1
Teaching of Morality	14.7	32.8	41.4
Positive Role Models	24.1	30.2	31.9
Affordable	69.8	4.3	18.1
Individual Instruction	12.1	25.9	53.4
Opportunities for Parent Participation	23.3	21.6	44.8
Parent Support Groups	28.4	24.1	35.3
Services for Children w/Special Needs	66.4	12.1	12.9
Proper Nutrition	27.6	15.5	47.4
Meets Health Needs	38.8	11.2	39.7

When asked what role religion should play in the education of children in public schools, 33.6% of parents reported that religion should play no role and should only be taught by parents in the home. 24.1% of parents reported that religion should play a small role, being taught as a separate class. Combined, these more secular viewpoints represent 57.7% of respondents. 18.1% believed religion should play a moderate role, being taught

as a class with regular prayer and discussion, while 11.2% believed religion should play a large role, being integrated into most curricula. These more religious viewpoints combined represent 29.3% of parents surveyed.

13% offered other opinions, which are reflected in qualitative comments. These comments provided some elaboration on the reasons for their opinions. Several parents alluded to the difficulty in having religion play a large role in education because of the diversity of religions represented in the public school population. For example, one parent asked the question, "What religion would you teach in a 'large role'?" Another parent wrote, "Depends on what religion." Yet another parent noted, "Not formally taught because too many religions." Other parents commented on the more secular idea of teaching common moral codes without religious practices. One parent stated, "The basis of world religions could be taught without the devotional aspects." Another wrote, "The same principles and respect can be taught without the religious overtones." Another parent commented that religion should be "taught in conjunction with history and social studies because of cultural significance." Some parents argued against current public school practices in the teaching of the origins of human life, such as, "If you teach evolution, must teach Creationism, too," and "same as evolution and other theories."

Parents were asked to give a qualitative response about the primary reason they chose the current type of schooling. The most common responses were quality of education and money, each representing 18.1% of the total responses. Religion, the Bible, and God received 12.9% of responses, and parental control received 11.2%. Less than 7% of parents reported better life experiences and socialization, morality (5.2%), belief in the public school system (5.2%), parents had that type of education (5.2%), smaller class sizes (4.3%), and other schools unavailable (3.4%), as reasons for choosing their current type of schooling.

## **Discussion**

In Southwest Missouri, as in the national population, most parents are choosing public schooling for their children. However, the number of parents in this Southwest Missouri sample choosing public education is only 52.6%, as compared to the estimated 96.2% nationwide. This difference is probably because equal numbers of surveys were sent to parents of each of the three groups (public, private, and home schools) rather than a random sampling such as in the national survey procedures. Most parents surveyed choose public schools because they are secular. Even religious parents reported preferring religion taught at home and not at school.

Many Southwest Missouri parents who were publicly schooled are choosing private and home school settings for their children. 83.6% reported Parent 1 as being public schooled, and 66.4% reported Parent 2 as being public schooled, but only 52.6% of parents surveyed are choosing public schools for their children. This may be partially accounted for in parents' general perceptions of public education as being lesser in quality than the alternatives. When parents were asked to rate public, private, and home school settings according to 16 criteria, home school settings received the highest ranking on eight of the criteria, including flexibility with family schedule, teaching of morality, positive role models, individual instruction, opportunities for parent participation, parent support groups, proper nutrition, and meets health needs. Home schooling earned the lowest ratings in six criteria: optimal learning experiences, curricular offerings, appropriate social atmosphere, teaches civic responsibility, quality teachers, affordability, and services for children with special needs.

Private schools received the highest rankings on five criteria: optimal learning experiences, appropriate social atmosphere, teaches civic responsibility, quality teachers, and effective teaching methods. Private schools earned the lowest rankings in seven of the 16 criteria, including flexibility with family schedule, affordability (tied with home schooling), opportunities for parent participation, parent support groups, services for children with special needs (tied with home schooling), proper nutrition, and meets health needs.

Public schools received the highest rankings on only three criteria: curricular offerings, affordability, and services for children with special needs. Public schools earned the lowest rankings in flexibility with family schedule (tied with private schools), teaching of morality, and positive role models. Paradoxically, most parents still chose public schools for their children. This may be due in part to the cost of private and home schooling. 18.1% of parents in this survey listed money as the primary reason for their school choice. Only 24.1% of parents reported annual household incomes over \$100,000, a more likely group to find private or home schooling affordable. Another 37.9%, however, reported annual household incomes between \$51,000 and \$100,000, which may be enough to support private and home schooling in southwest Missouri, where tuition for private schools is around \$5,000 per year and cost of living is lower than coastal states. Perhaps in these families both parents work outside of the home and do not have the time to invest in home education.

Religion was reported by 12.9% of parents as the primary reason for school choice. Only quality of education and money (both with 18.1%)

were selected more. 11.2% of parents chose “parent has more control” as the primary reason for school choice, and 6.9% selected “better life experiences and socialization.” “Morality” and “believe in public school system” both received 5.2%, “parents had this type of education” and smaller class sizes received 4.3%, and “other schools unavailable” received 3.4%.

29.3% of parents want religion to play a large role in the public education of children. Nationally, estimates range from 30% to 86% of parents choosing home schooling on the basis of religion.<sup>36</sup> These vast ranges are probably due to differences in the populations surveyed. These estimates suggest, however, that although some Southwest Missouri parents want religion to play a major role in their children’s education, most parents prefer a more secular approach, similar to the national trend. The Christian religion is a vast majority religion in Southwest Missouri, and parents may believe their child is going to be taught by teachers and socialized with children from Christian families in the public schools even if there is no direct biblical instruction.

During the course of the study, two limitations were identified. First, the ratings of criteria employed in the study were derived by the authors primarily from empirical research. Perhaps, by first soliciting the criteria from a select group of home schooling parents to provide initial benchmark data might have yielded additional and authentic criteria from the standpoint of practicing home schooling parents. Also, due to budgetary limitations, and logistical difficulties, the questionnaire could not be provided in Spanish to meet the growing number of Hispanic families who may be involved in home schooling practices throughout the region. Given the large presence of these immigrant Hispanic families in Southwest Missouri (2.2% in 2005), and the concerns that have been expressed regarding the irregular attendance of their children in the region’s public schools, it would have been instructive to beam the search light on the alternative forms of education (if any) that are employed by these migrant families.

Southwest Missouri parents reflect many of the viewpoints reported by parents in national surveys. Although the evangelical Christian demographic is large in the region, and parents rate public education as being of lesser quality than the alternatives, most parents still choose public education for their children. The responses on this survey would suggest that there will always be some who will not accept the necessary secular stance of public education and choose private or home education. However, quality of education can be improved. More research is needed to better understand why public education is perceived in this way, and how public school educators and administrators can improve educational outcomes to attract

those who opt out. Further inquiry into the causes of increasing numbers of Muslims and other religious minorities in home schooling might also provide insight into how public schools can better serve these populations.

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