

New Followers of an Old Path—Homeschoolers

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Although most people think of America's current mass education system as normal, compulsory education is quite new—less than 150 years old. During the late 1960s and 1970s, a movement arose to reject the modern innovation and return to the approach where parents were responsible for their children's education. Authors like John Holt (*How Children Fail*) and Raymond and Dorothy Moore (*Better Late Than Early*) gave the clarion call. By the end of the 1980s, some form of homeschooling was legal in all 50 states. Now, after a generation of homeschoolers have graduated, what is known about this alternative mode of education?

According to the report from the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Studies (NCES), approximately 1.5 million children were educated at home in 2007. Leaders in national homeschooling research would place the figure higher, at 2 to 2.5 million.¹ Whichever figure is used, homeschooling has evolved from an upstart political movement to a firmly established educational choice. "Homeschool" is now a listed option on PSAT, ACT, and SAT registration forms. Homeschoolers are eligible for federal financial aid, and Web sites of most higher learning institutions offer links to homeschooler-specific admission protocols.

The homeschooling population is too diverse to define with any single demographic, as seen in figures from the *NCES Statistical Analysis: Homeschooling in the U.S. 2003*. Parents have a variety of reasons for homeschooling, and those reasons frequently overlap and change. The three most important (in order of percentages) are "concern for the environment at schools," "dissatisfaction with academic instruction at schools," and "religion/morality."² Although whites are still in the majority, minorities are on the rise.² Families come from a mix of income levels comparable to public school students.² Urban families outnumber rural three-to-one.² Not quite half of homeschooling parents hold college degrees.² Although conservative Christians continue as a

strong force, virtually every religious affiliation is now represented in the homeschool community, along with many who claim no religion at all.

The "how" of homeschooling is just as diverse as the "who." The methodologies cover a broad spectrum. At one end is the "school in a box," which differs from a school only by the setting; the curriculum, sequence, and methodologies would fit into any standard classroom. On the other end, is "unschooling" in which, although tools for learning and opportunities for exploration are provided, the course of learning is determined by the child's interests and is incorporated into daily life rather than following any pre-set scope and sequence. More parents start with something closer to "school in a box." No matter where they start, over time most commonly move toward the center, ending up with an eclectic mix of what best suits their family situation, children's learning styles, and their own abilities.³ Precisely what "school" looks like may vary considerably from year to year.

Homeschoolers may create co-ops ranging from two or three families to ones that resemble small private schools. In areas with high concentrations of homeschoolers, businesses such as YMCAs find a population ready to fill school-day hours. Groups such as Boy and Girl Scouts, Civil Air Patrol, 4-H, religious organizations, and others are highly popular. Many homeschoolers are involved in volunteer activities and community service.⁴ Homeschoolers often do more field trips than are possible for the average school class, providing a wide range of experience and exposure.

But are homeschoolers "making the grade?" According to the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI), which collects nationwide research results, the average homeschooler consistently scores higher on standardized achievement tests compared to average public school students, with median scores from 15-30 percentile points higher than the public school norm.^{4,5} They also score comparably to or above public school students on the PSAT, SAT, and ACT.⁵ Studies have

found no or only a very weak relationship in the outcomes on standardized testing relating to: how much money parents spend on their homeschooling, level of family income, the degree of state regulation on homeschooling, the formal educational level of the parents, whether parents are certified teachers, or the amount of time the student spends in formal instruction.⁴

Many factors may contribute to this success. The student-teacher ratio is optimal. Parents have a deeply vested interest in their child's success and an intimate knowledge of their child. There is complete freedom to individualize the course to suit the student's learning style and interests. Homeschoolers can take advantage of educational opportunities as they come rather than strictly following a calendar. Homeschooling is outcome-based education—no new concept is introduced until mastery of the old is achieved. For families who follow a more traditional academic approach, very little time is not directly on-task, so formal schoolwork takes much less time, giving the child more free time to play and pursue his/her passions.

Critics frequently raise the issue of socialization. Homeschoolers find the question quite odd. Does "socialization" mean having contact with others? As mentioned earlier, homeschoolers are generally active in a wide variety of activities that bring them into contact with other children and adults, of all ages, from a variety of backgrounds. Rural homeschoolers may tend to be more isolated, but that is a function of geography more than of educational methodology. Does socialization mean learning proper behavior? A number of researchers found that homeschoolers show a greater degree of social maturity than their institutionally-educated counterparts.^{6,7} This is no surprise, since homeschoolers tend to model their behavior on parents and other influential adults in their lives, rather than on equally-immature peers. Does socialization mean learning to form friendships? Homeschoolers tend to form friendships on the same basis that adults do, that of shared interests, without the age/grade bias or other distinctions.

What effect does homeschooling have on children's self-concept? Researchers using the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale have found consistently that homeschoolers show equal or better levels of self-concept, self-confidence, and maturity than institutional school students.^{8,9,10} Why? Homeschooling is a deliberate choice

requiring sacrifice of time and effort, so the very fact that they are homeschooled may make a certain value statement to children. Most homeschooling parents place great importance on learning daily living skills and assign responsibilities in the home accordingly. This provides a sense of accomplishment and a sense of contributing to the well-being of the family, both of which build a child's self-esteem. Homeschooled children don't have to worry about "fitting in" with the popular clique. Their sense of self doesn't depend on referencing other children in any way at all. Most homeschoolers maintain a strong relationship with their family and parents—even through their teen years—and that relationship gives them a strong foundation from which they can deal with the negative influences that come into their lives.

How do these things impact homeschoolers once they are out of high school? In a landmark study in 2003 and detailed in the book, *Homeschooled and Now Adults*, Brian Ray of the NHERI investigated the question. Almost 75 percent of homeschoolers 18-24 years old attended college, completed a bachelor's, master's, doctoral, or professional degree; more than 50 percent of their public school peers, in contrast, dropped out of high school, stopped schooling after high school, were in vocational/technical schools, or completed only a vocational/technical degree.⁵ One reason for the difference may be that almost half of all homeschooling parents hold college degrees themselves; this probably makes them more likely to advocate the same path for their children. Another reason may be that homeschooling parents place a high value on education.

Homeschoolers are good college student material, both academically and socially.¹¹ The nature of homeschooling, focusing more on the student-as-learner than on the parent-as-teacher, fosters independent learning. Homeschoolers typically have "learned how to learn," know how to go about finding information they need, and are, in general, confident of their ability to handle whatever work is expected—all qualities that may contribute to a successful college career.

These same qualities may come into play in the world of work. As self-starters, homeschoolers are able to learn on their own and adapt well to changing situations, characteristics that are valuable to employers. This also may explain why many homeschoolers chose entrepreneurial endeavors. They are exposed to workers in a variety of fields

and may get to observe people doing jobs that excite their interests. Many homeschooled teens, with more free time, may work part time, intern, or serve an apprenticeship. Not surprisingly, virtually all homeschool graduates in the 2003 study were Internet-savvy, compared to 37 percent of the general population.⁵ This difference, too, holds a bonus in the world of work.

Some of the attitude questions in the 2003 study are quite interesting. More homeschool graduates expressed satisfaction with their jobs, their family's financial situation, and life in general than did the general population.⁵ When asked to rate the most important factor for getting ahead, 85 percent answered "hard work," 14 percent said "hard work and luck equally," and only 0.5 percent said "luck or help." Public school grads responded 68, 22, and nearly a full 10 percent, respectively.⁵

Homeschool graduates have an impact in their communities as they are almost twice as likely to participate in community service than is the general public, and are also more likely to belong to community or professional organizations.⁵ They are a potent political force as well, as many state and national legislators have learned when contemplating legislation that might affect homeschoolers. Homeschoolers are active on other issues as well. Although almost half of other Americans believe they have no say in what the federal government does, and over a third believe that politics and government are too complicated to understand, at least 93 percent of homeschoolers reject both of those negative outlooks⁵—and put feet and dollars to that conviction. Homeschool graduates are more likely to take an active political role, vote, and contribute to political causes than are their peers in public education.⁵ Again, parental example likely plays a part.

In his first major speech on education, opening his discussion of proposed reforms to the public education system, President Obama said, "The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens." The question of how to bring excellence in education to the public school arena is a matter of much debate, but for another arena, the question isn't a question anymore. It has been resoundingly and positively answered: Pretty much no matter who does it, or how they do it, *homeschooling works*. As more and more homeschoolers graduate and make their way out into the world of work and community life, their impact is going to be felt in ever-growing circles.

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