

The Home-Schooling Special

Today's choicest choice

For those who think about school choice, vouchers and charter schools are canonical. But going by the numbers, home schooling is the choicest item on the choice menu. A few thousand students use vouchers, and a million or more students attend charter schools, but home-schooled students, now estimated at some 2 million, outnumber the other two groups combined.

Home schooling is hardly foreign to the American experience. John Locke's advice to parents in colonial America was to educate their children at home. He could not imagine "what qualities are ordinarily to be got from...a troop of playfellows [at school]...usually assembled together from parents of all kinds." Even if the teacher's industry and skill "be ever so great, it can[not]...be expected that he should instruct them successfully in anything but their books."

But somewhere in the middle of the 19th century, John Locke's advice was forgotten, schooling became compulsory, and home schooling had to be reinvented. The honor goes to the antibureaucratic, anticompetitive, "new Left" school of thought articulated by Ivan Illich and his articulate disciple, John Holt, who captured the imagination of the flower children of the sixties.

If the baby was born in hippieville, the toddler was soon kidnapped by Christian social conservatives. By 1990, 85 to 90 percent of all home schoolers came from the ranks of the Religious Right. Even Holt could not resist a Libertarian cry:

Some may feel that the schools teach a dog-eat-dog competitiveness; others that they teach a mealy-mouth Socialism.... What is important is not that all readers...should agree on these questions, but that we should...work for...the right of all people to take their children out of schools.

That right is to be found in the penumbra of the Constitution that guarantees the right of privacy, home schoolers say, but getting the Supreme Court to agree has not been easy. In a famous case, the Court was persuaded, on religious grounds, to exempt Amish adolescents age 14 and older from Pennsylvania's compulsory education law. It said nothing about the right to home school younger children or the rights of those who have secular reasons for preferring education at home.

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Then last July a California appeals court drew on the Amish decision to interpret an ambiguous California law as giving families the right to home school their children. Oddly enough, the same court had said—only a few months earlier—that no child could be taught at home except under the supervision of a certified teacher. The

court changed its mind, however, after Governor Schwarzenegger, the state secretary of education, and leading newspapers, to say nothing of highly organized groups of home schoolers, condemned the court's action. Reversing itself, the California court concluded that ambiguities in state law should be interpreted in a way that makes them consistent with the federal Constitution. If Amish adolescents had the right to home school for religious reasons, that same right had to be given to all Californians.

The California decision is only the latest in a string of legal and political victories for home schoolers, who have parlayed Internet connections into a political potency that charter and voucher proponents have never matched.

The Internet is also feeding home schoolers an ever broader range of curricular options, so that families and students of all types—leftist, social conservative, rock star, or skateboard enthusiast—have easy access to the kind of instruction they desire. With improved educational materials readily available, home schoolers are winning spelling and geography bees, scoring off the charts on statewide tests, and gaining access to elite colleges.

As virtual schools, distance learning, sophisticated educational software, and synchronous online communication continue to spread, the movement is poised for rapid growth. Home schooling will segue into hybrid education, historian Milton Gaither says (see "Home Schooling Goes Mainstream," *features*, page 10). Some courses will be taken in school, others online. Students could attend district or charter schools during the elementary years but decide to take most high school courses online.

State legislatures are likely to become increasingly accommodating toward a movement that saves them money. The day may come when we hear the phrase, "We are all home schoolers now." John Locke would be pleased.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.



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