

Homeschooling comes of age

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THE rise of homeschooling is one of the most significant social trends of the past half century. This reemergence of what is in fact an old practice has occurred for a distinctly modern reason: a desire to wrest control from the education bureaucrats and reestablish the family as central to a child's learning. Homeschooling is almost always a matter of choice. Schools are generally available, but homeschooling families have chosen not to use them.

The rapid growth of the homeschooling movement took the professional education establishment by surprise. When I estimated in 1985 that about 50,000 children were being homeschooled, one expert called it "wishful thinking, or at least artful advocacy." In 1990, as a researcher with the Department of Education, I suggested that the number had probably grown to 250,000 to 355,000 children. At the time, I based my estimate on three different sources: data from state education agencies; distribution of curricular packages for homeschoolers; and state homeschool associations' estimates

of their constituencies. As state data became more reliable, I turned to that source alone. The number continued to grow, and critics began citing my estimates.

The numbers are still growing. If states with reliable information are good indicators for the rest of the country, the number of homeschoolers nearly tripled in the five years from 1990–91 to 1995–96, when there were, according to the best possible estimate, about 700,000 homeschoolers. There is evidence, such as Florida's annual survey of homeschooling filers, that the population is growing at around 15 to 20 percent per year. I know of no state where the number is declining. It is extremely difficult to predict when the growth will taper off. If it keeps growing at this rate, there would be around 1.5 to 2 million children homeschooling by 2000–01 (about 3 to 4 percent of school-aged children nationwide). For a number of different reasons, parents are losing faith in the American classroom, and homeschooling is becoming a serious (and growing) alternative.

Private schools have traditionally provided havens for those who dissent from the public school curriculum. Indeed, the competitive impact of homeschooling probably falls most heavily on private schools. Surveys suggest that among homeschooled children who previously attended a school, a disproportionate number attended a private school. A movement toward unstructured learning, strong and vigorous among some private schools in the 1960s, is now languishing, having lost many of its students to the liberal wing of the homeschooling movement and to various public school-choice programs. The Christian schools that sprung up in the 1980s have also lost students to homeschooling, but their growth curve was sufficiently strong that they remain robust. These schools also compete on a turf where public schools must not go—religious education. Still, when one might expect private schools to be growing, they are holding even. Homeschooling has taken up the slack.

The contemporary homeschooling movement began sometime around mid century as a liberal, not a conservative, alternative to the public school. A handful of families (possibly as many as 10,000) in the late fifties and early sixties found schools too rigidly conservative. They pursued instead a liberal philosophy of education as advocated by educators such

as the late John Holt, who believed that the best learning takes place without an established curriculum, and that the child should pursue his own interests with the support and encouragement of parents and other adults.

Then, in the 1980s, as the school culture drifted to the left, conservative and religious families were surprised to find themselves in a countercultural position. Many turned to Christian schools while others began homeschooling. Some believed religious duty required them to teach their own children; others sought to integrate religion, learning, and family life. Both the left and right wings of homeschooling are active today, and many families have both philosophical and religious reasons for their choice. Joining them are many homeschoolers who simply seek the highest quality education for their child, which they believe public and even private schools can no longer provide.

An old idea

Homeschooling is not a new idea or practice. For centuries children have learned outside formal school settings, even when schools were readily available. Thinkers from a variety of philosophical traditions have frowned upon formal schooling for a number of reasons. John Locke, for example, maintained that the primary aim of education was virtue, and that the home was the best place to teach it. Even John Dewey expressed regrets about formal schooling:

A society is a number of people held together because they are working along common lines, in a common spirit, and with common aims.... *The radical reason that the present school cannot organize itself as a natural social unit is because just this element of common and productive activity is absent.*

Dewey held that school had been artificially "set apart" from society, and had become "so isolated from the ordinary conditions and motives of life" that it was "the one place in the world where it is most difficult to get experience—the mother of all discipline worth the name." He observed that "where the parent is intelligent enough to recognize what is best for the child, and is able to supply what is needed, we find the child learning." Dewey did not advocate homeschooling. He hoped instead to mimic the ideal home environment to

create the ideal school. He thought teaching in the home could be done "only in a comparatively meager and haphazard manner." But given the choice between homeschooling and a rigid school system intent only on imparting information, Dewey might well have recommended homeschooling.

What is often forgotten is that in the broad sweep of time, universal, compulsory, and comprehensive schooling is a relatively new invention. Not until the nineteenth century did state legislatures begin requiring local governments to build schools and parents to enroll their children in them. Even then, compulsory requirements extended to only a few months a year. Not until the mid-twentieth century was universal high-school graduation a realistic goal. Even at this point, some traditional communities—such as the Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, and Amish—continued to keep their school-aged children at home. Only recently have we begun to treat schooling as a full-time affair entrusted to professional teachers. And yet, in such a short span of time, most of the nation has come to accept classroom schooling as the norm, and so the recent upsurge in homeschooling has come to many as a surprise.

Three and four decades ago homeschooling was an unacceptable practice for satisfying compulsory education requirements in most states. The early pioneers of the contemporary movement often stayed "underground," and those who were discovered often faced fines or even jail. Gradually, state legislatures changed their laws, however, and all states now accept homeschooling as a legally valid alternative. Still, regulations vary from state to state. At a minimum, a family must file some basic information with either the state or local education agency. Some states have additional requirements, such as evaluation of homeschool students or minimal educational levels or testing for the homeschooling teacher. Many families still stay "underground"—out of fear that the legal environment will change again or because they disagree with particular regulations.

A homeschooling profile

The main difficulty in judging the scope of the homeschooling movement is limited and imperfect data. There is no definitive list of all homeschoolers in any locality, so the researcher usually must rely on a limited number of questions

in a federally sponsored survey or on limited samples. If the latter, the sampled lists represent self-selected groups: members of a homeschooling association; those who file papers with the state in those states that require it; and subscribers to homeschooling magazines and newsletters. In addition, some homeschoolers refuse to respond to particular surveys: For example, a paranoid homeschooler may refuse to participate in a government survey while answering one from a homeschooling organization. Or a secular family that homeschools their children may not respond to a survey connected to, say, Bob Jones University. To make matters even more difficult, a substantial and influential number of homeschoolers are philosophically opposed to cooperating with researchers.

With these cautions in mind, however, it is still possible to make some important observations about the movement. According to the surveys, the typical homeschooling family is religious, conservative, white, middle-income, and better educated than the general population. Homeschoolers are more likely to be part of a two-parent family, and there are usually two children of school age who are homeschooling and a third, usually younger child in the family. The mother typically assumes the largest share of the teaching responsibility, although fathers almost always pitch in, and in a substantial number of families—possibly as many as one out of ten—fathers take the primary responsibility. Despite this predominant profile, it is also clear that the full range of American families are trying or considering homeschooling.

Future growth could occur most rapidly among ethnic minorities. Though African Americans and other non-Caucasian groups are under-represented among homeschoolers, the next generation of minorities is seriously considering it. In a survey of selected classes at Vanderbilt University and Nashville State Tech (a selective private university and a two-year college), almost half (45.3 percent) of the African-American students said “yes” or “maybe” when asked if they would homeschool their own children in the future. Among other non-Caucasian groups, two-thirds indicated “yes” or “maybe.” In contrast, less than one-fourth of the white students said this. The survey was small (254 students) and nonrandom, representing students enrolled in the classes of the researchers, whose in-

fluence was perhaps stronger among the non-Caucasian students. Nonetheless, the results are startling. Public educators who count on the loyalty of ethnic minorities as the backbone of their big-city clientele may be in for yet another surprise.

The curriculum

While both progressive and religious reasons for homeschooling remain important, a plurality of families say they are turning to homeschooling because they are dissatisfied with the quality of the public schools. Take, for example, a Florida Department of Education survey sent to homeschooling families for over a decade. Until 1994–95, the majority of families named “religion” as the reason why they chose homeschooling. This shifted in 1995 when, for the first time, the single most important reason for homeschooling became “dissatisfaction with the public school instructional program.” Thirty-seven percent of parents gave this reason, compared to 29.6 percent who cited “Religious Reasons” that year. In 1995–96, the last year in which this survey question was asked, 42 percent of families cited dissatisfaction with the public school environment—especially safety, drugs, and adverse peer pressure. Religious reasons trailed at 27 percent, dissatisfaction with public school instruction at 16 percent, and other reasons at 15 percent.

A media stereotype would have homeschooling children start the day with a prayer and a salute to the flag and then gather around the kitchen table for structured lessons. This is not only atypical, it fails to present the full range of practices. Most homeschooling children spend time at libraries, museums, factories, nursing homes, churches, or classes offered at a local public school, a community college, a parks department, or elsewhere. Normally, parents plan and implement the learning program, although sometimes they find a tutor or older children organize their own independent study. It may be structured or unstructured; it may be affiliated with a public or private school; and it often involves shared lessons with other homeschooling families.

Critics of homeschooling sometimes highlight the lack of educational resources available to homeschoolers. But the resources can be found. Local support groups share experiences,

meet for common activities, and help newcomers get started. Homeschooling associations provide advice and information, run conferences on legal, philosophical, and pedagogical issues, and review educational materials at exhibition booths. Electronic homeschool discussion groups abound. Parents also find guidance in books, magazines, and newsletters. Topics range from legal issues to advice on learning disabilities and how to avoid burnout.

The resources also reflect the philosophical and pedagogical diversity of homeschoolers. The magazine *Drinking Gourd*, named after a folk song about the underground railway, provides articles and book reviews emphasizing cultural and ethnic diversity. *Nathan News*, published by the National Challenged Homeschoolers Associated Network, provides articles by parents and experts on such topics as "Auditory Memory Strategies and Activities," "Custom Fitting a Program for the LD Child," or "My Recipe for IEP." In addition, parents obtain advice, texts, services, and curricula from public and private schools and other institutions. Alaska has served homeschooling students for decades through correspondence teaching. In California, a child may enroll in a public school independent-study program but base his studies in the home (the state does not like to call this "homeschooling"). Some states, such as Washington and Iowa, give families the right to enroll their children part-time in their local public schools and allow the district to claim a portion of the state's per pupil assistance for the enrollment. Some school districts sponsor centers where families may obtain resources, instructional support, and classes. Usually interested teachers or other public school professionals start these experimental partnerships. These programs are too new and varied to assess, but both teachers and parents who participate in them seem excited by the possibilities.

Report card

When people ask—How well do homeschoolers do?—they usually want to know about test scores. Of course, many homeschoolers reject this criterion, since their mission is to impart not simply skills but a particular set of values. That said, virtually all of the reported data show that homeschooled

children score above average, sometimes well above average. Self-selection may affect this result, just as it affects other aspects of homeschooling research. Further, even where state law requires testing, substantial numbers of homeschoolers do not comply. Still, the available evidence suggests steady success. For example, Alaska, which has tested children in its homeschooling program for several decades, finds them, as a group, above average. In a very different study, commissioned by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a conservative Christian organization, Lawrence Rudner of the University of Maryland collected and analyzed results from the 12,000 students nationwide who had used the Bob Jones University testing services. The homeschooled children placed in the 62nd to 91st percentile of national norms, depending on the grade level and test subject area. Of course, we don't know how these same children would do in school. But there is certainly no evidence to suggest that homeschooling harms academic achievement.

Significantly, a handful of studies suggest that student achievement for homeschoolers has no relation to the educational attainment of the homeschooling parent. This is consistent with tutoring studies that indicate that the education level of a tutor has little to do with the achievement of a tutored child. One explanation might be that the advantages of one-to-one learning outweigh the advantages of professional training.

Homeschoolers have also had considerable success in college admissions. Karl M. Bunday, a homeschooler from Minnesota, maintains a web page that, at last check, lists over 900 colleges and universities that have admitted homeschoolers. Several years ago, I telephoned a small group of admissions officers to find out what they do with homeschoolers' applications. All (California Institute of Technology, Harvard-Radcliffe Colleges, Howard University, Stanford University, the University of Texas, and the University of Wisconsin) indicated that they are pleased to consider homeschooled teenagers for admission. All said that they would accept standardized admission test scores along with supportive material describing the subjects studied and other relevant experience. Some thought that well-qualified homeschoolers bring fresh diversity to their student body. Most admissions officers guessed that they had

admitted as many as 1 percent of their undergraduates on this basis. Most also thought that some homeschoolers had slipped in unnoticed, submitting a high-school transcript obtained through a special program or a correspondence school.

Critics often cite inadequate socialization as the fatal flaw in homeschooling. But such criticisms rest on certain professional assumptions about the nature of "healthy socialization." For the fact is that many homeschoolers worry about the values that predominate in the public school program and about negative peer pressure. They believe that it is preferable for children to spend more time with adults. But this does not mean that homeschooled children are isolated from their peers. They participate in homeschool support groups, scouting groups, churches, and other associations.

No one knows for certain what is the best kind of socialization; and there are important disagreements about what makes for a good and healthy child. Still, one can inquire, more narrowly and always imperfectly, about specific measurable elements of social development. For example, in one study of the social skills of homeschoolers and nonhomeschoolers, both groups scored as "well-adjusted," with comparable scores on scales measuring aggression, reliance on others, perception of support from others, perceptions of limits to be followed, and interpersonal relations among family members. Not surprisingly, the nonhomeschoolers scored somewhat higher in resolving interpersonal problems with other children. In another controlled study, a researcher videotaped 70 homeschooled children and 70 school children at play. Trained counselors viewed the videotapes and rated individual children without knowing the child's school status: They found the homeschooled children to have fewer behavioral problems. Of course, these kinds of studies are necessarily limited, but the findings provide no basis to question the social development of homeschooled children.

Public acceptance

All evidence suggests that homeschooling is here to stay, although it is hard to say when the growth will peak. Now that all states have adopted flexible legislation and now that resources for homeschoolers are readily available, a significant factor contributing to growth will be public support. Accord-

ing to one survey, 95 percent of homeschoolers say they want or need "encouragement from family, friends, church, and community." In the 1980s, most Americans withheld support and encouragement. In 1985, only 16 percent of respondents to the annual *Phi Delta Kappan* Gallup poll thought that the homeschool movement was a "good thing"; 73 percent thought it was a "bad thing." By 1988, 28 percent rated it a good thing and 59 percent rated it a bad thing. By 1997, the approval rating had grown to 36 percent while the disapproval rating edged down to 57 percent.

In 1988, Gallup also asked whether parents should have a legal right to homeschool. A majority (53 percent) said they "should"; 39 percent said they "should not." When asked—"Do you think that the homeschools should or should not be required to meet the same teacher certification standards as the public schools?"—82 percent said "should" while only 12 percent said "should not." In 1997, the poll also asked whether "homeschools should or should not be required to guarantee a minimum level of educational quality"—88 percent responded affirmatively. The trend appears to be toward acceptance, so long as there is regulation.

But the most important factor in determining the future of homeschooling is the state of public and private schooling. In the nineteenth century, when public schools were Protestant in flavor, a vigorous Catholic school movement sprang up. Today, as the schools have become increasingly secular, a vigorous Christian (largely conservative Protestant) school movement developed. Today, both public and private schools operate like small bureaucracies, depending on professional expertise for most aspects of their program. As long as there are parents who object to the bureaucratic nature of today's schools, I would expect homeschooling to thrive.

Good citizens

Critics see homeschoolers as isolationist, atomistic, and even undemocratic. They think homeschooling violates the ideal of education as a public obligation—one that must be met, at least in part, through cooperative exchange within a community. But is this really an accurate picture of homeschooling? The hard evidence suggests that the vast majority of

homeschooling families are more active in civic affairs than public school families.

Christian Smith and David Sikkink of the University of North Carolina found, based on responses to the 1996 National Household Education Survey, that homeschooling parents, along with other families who choose private schools, demonstrate higher levels of participation at almost every level of civic activity than do families who send their children to public schools. This included those choosing Catholic schools, other private religious schools, secular private schools, and homeschooling. Each of these groups were more likely to vote, contribute money to political causes, contact elected officials about their views, attend a public meeting or rally, or belong to community groups and volunteer associations. Smith and Sikkink found this to be true even after they compared only those families with similar education, income, age, race, family structure, region, and number of hours per week that parents worked. These characteristics explained some, but not all, of the higher civic and associational activity of the families who had chosen private schools or homeschooling.

There is also plenty of anecdotal evidence that homeschoolers are interested in political efforts to reform education in general, and are especially interested in issues that affect homeschooling directly. Homeschoolers are capable of concerted political action. Several national and state organizations are capable of mobilizing large numbers of constituents wherever and whenever their interests are at stake. Probably the largest of these is HSLDA. Headed by Michael P. Farris, it employs a large legal staff specializing in homeschooling law. The organization routinely monitors developments in every state and keeps its membership informed of the legal limits on the authority of education officials. It is ready to negotiate or litigate where it believes its members' interests are threatened. An affiliated organization, the National Center for Home Education (NCHE), has a congressional-action program with a sophisticated electronic communication system. Other organizations, such as Clonlara Home Based Education (a secular institution located in Michigan and offering support to homeschoolers throughout the world), do the same for their constituencies. State associations are also active. As a result,

efforts to pass stricter regulations or rules that threaten the authority of parents to homeschool their children are likely to face organized and informed opposition and sometimes lawsuits.

So far, homeschoolers have succeeded in winning a number of favorable policy changes—most notably, changes in state compulsory education laws. Homeschoolers have also flexed their political muscle in Congress. In 1994, Congressman George Miller offered a minor amendment to an omnibus education bill that, on one interpretation, would have required states to make sure all schools, including homeschools, had certified teachers. This was not explicit, and no one in Congress intended this. Worried nonetheless, HSLDA urged its membership to contact key Congressional offices, swamping targeted offices with mail and telephone calls. Representatives fell over each other to appease the homeschooling lobby. Congressmen Harold E. Ford, Jr., then chair of the education committee, and Dale E. Kildee offered an amendment that expressly excluded homeschooling from any provisions in the legislation. During floor debates, representatives praised homeschooling: One confessed that he was homeschooled as a child, and several proudly announced that their grandchildren were homeschooled. The Ford-Kildee amendment passed 424 to 1. Homeschoolers have also won federal legislation assuring equal treatment in access to federal loans and grants for postsecondary education.

The future

It is too early to tell whether homeschooling will establish itself as a major alternative to the modern school. But some things are clear: Homeschooling is becoming more common and more widely accepted. American families from diverse backgrounds resort to homeschooling because they are dissatisfied with the philosophy, the content, or the quality of American schools. The great majority of homeschooling families are not separatists and isolationists but active members of civil society. They seek to improve this nation, but they want to raise and educate their children in the meantime. Ultimately, they may help to inspire a great renewal of American education, or at least preserve values and ideas that are out of fashion within the education establishment.