

The Civic Perils of Homeschooling

Homeschooling may satisfy parents' desire to customize education for their children, but such customization reflects a consumer mentality in education and potentially dilutes active democratic citizenship.

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Customization threatens to insulate students from exposure to diverse ideas and people and thereby to shield them from the vibrancy of a pluralistic democracy.

Just 10 years ago, educating a child at home was illegal in several states. Today, not only is homeschooling legal everywhere, it's booming. Homeschooling is probably the fastest-growing segment of the education market, expanding at a rate of 15 to 20 percent a year (Lines, 2000a). More children are homeschooled than attend charter schools. More children are homeschooled than attend conservative Christian academies.

And it's not just left-wing unschoolers and right-wing religious fundamentalists who are keeping their children at home.

Taking advantage of the Internet and other new technologies, more middle-of-the-road suburbanites are homeschooling, too. *Time* and *Newsweek* have featured homeschooling on their covers. The U.S. Congress passed a resolution in 1999 declaring the week of September 19 to be National Home Education Week. Homeschooling has gone mainstream.

In response to the rise of homeschooling, policymakers and public school administrators and teachers need to consider what makes homeschooling so popular. Chief among the many reasons to homeschool is the ability to customize a child's education at home.

Customizing Education at Home

The ability to custom-tailor an education for their children is often the motivation

for parents to homeschool. No other education arrangement offers the same freedom to arrange an education designed for an individual student; in homeschools, parents are responsible not only for selecting what their children will learn, but when, how, and with whom they will learn. In this sense, homeschooling represents the apex of customization in education.

But is this customization always a good thing? From the standpoint of the parents who choose to homeschool, it surely is; they wouldn't be doing it otherwise, especially in light of the considerable energy and time it requires of them. But considered from the standpoint of democratic citizenship, the opportunity to customize education through homeschooling isn't an unadulterated good. Customizing education may permit schooling to be tailored for each individual student, but total customization also threatens to insulate students from exposure to diverse ideas and people and thereby to shield them from the vibrancy of a pluralistic democracy. These risks are perhaps greatest for homeschoolers. To understand why, we need first to understand more about the current practice of homeschooling.

Homeschooling Today

Homeschooling is more than an education alternative. It is also a social movement (Stevens, 2001; Talbot, 2001). In 1985, approximately 50,000 children were being educated at home. In 2002, at least 1 million children are being homeschooled, with some estimates pegging the number at 2 million, an increase of 20- or 40-fold. (It's symptomatic of the unregulated environment of homeschooling that precise figures on the number of homeschoolers are impossible to establish.) Depending on

the estimate you choose (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001; Lines, 2000a), homeschoolers account for 2–4 percent of the school-going population.

Homeschooling parents are politically active. Former Pennsylvania Representative Bill Goodling, the former chair of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, has called homeschoolers “the most effective education lobby on Capitol Hill” (as cited in Golden, 2000). Homeschoolers have established both local and national networks for

lobbying purposes and for offering curricular support to one another. Several national organizations, led by the Home School Legal Defense Association, promote homeschooling. Even the former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, is a fan—he has created a for-profit company called K12, the purpose of which is to supply curricular and testing materials to homeschoolers.

But who homeschools, and why? Two main groups of homeschoolers have emerged, both of which raise difficult questions about customization.

The larger of the groups is the Christian right. Although homeschooling has become a much more diverse enterprise in the past 10 years, its strength as a social movement and the majority of its practitioners are conservative Christians. Precise data are scarce, but researchers tend to agree that whereas homeschools of the 1970s “reflected a liberal, humanistic, pedagogical orientation,” the majority of homeschools in the 1980s and 1990s “became grounds of and for ideological, conservative, religious expressions of educational matters” (Carper, 2000, p. 16). Today,



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most parents choose to educate their children at home because they believe that their children’s moral and spiritual needs will not be met in campus-based schools.

Those who educate their children at home for religious reasons often object to the secular bias of public schools. By keeping their children at home, they seek to provide a proper religious education free from the damning influences of secularism and pop culture. These homeschoolers wish to avoid the public school at all costs.

The second group practices a different kind of homeschooling. They seek partnerships with public schools to avail themselves of resources, support, guidance, and extracurricular activities that they could not otherwise obtain or provide at home. For these parents, some participation in public schools is desirable.

Various mechanisms have emerged to allow homeschooled students to connect on a partial basis with the public school system. In California, for example, approximately 10 percent of the charter schools serve students

whose primary learning is at home (Lines, 2000b). Other districts have set up “virtual” academies online to aid in the enrollment of homeschoolers. Still other school districts permit students to attend some classes but not others and to participate in extracurricular activities (Rothstein, 2002). Finally, a few public school districts have set up homeschooling resource centers, staffed by public school teachers and professional curriculum developers, that homeschooling parents can use at their convenience.

Democratic Citizenship and Customization

Each kind of homeschooler—the family who teaches the child solely at home and the family who seeks some interaction with the public school system—is practicing customization in education. For the first, parents can tailor the education environment to their own convictions and to their beliefs about what their child’s needs and interests are. For the second, parents can select the aspects of the public system they and their child want, creating an overall

program designed for their child.

What's to worry about either kind of customization? Let me put the matter quite simply. Customizing a child's education through homeschooling represents the victory of a consumer mentality within education, suggesting that the only purpose that education should serve is to please and satisfy the

Students should encounter materials, ideas, and people that they or their parents have not chosen or selected.



Homeschooling is the apogee of parental control over a child's education, where no other institution has a claim to influence the schooling of the child. Parents serve as the only filter for a child's education, the final arbiters of what gets included and what gets excluded.

This potentially compromises citizenship in the following ways:

■ In a diverse, democratic society, part of able citizenship is to come to respect the fact that other people will have beliefs and convictions, religious and otherwise, that conflict with one's own. Yet from the standpoint of citizenship, these other people are equals. And students must learn not only that such people exist, but how to engage and deliberate with them in the public arena. Thus, students should encounter materials, ideas, and people that they or their parents have not chosen or selected in advance.

■ Citizenship is the social glue that binds a diverse people together. To be a citizen is to share something in common with one's fellow citizens. As the legal scholar

Sunstein (2001) has argued, a heterogeneous society without some shared experiences and common values has a difficult time addressing common problems and risks social fragmentation. Schooling is one of the few remaining social institutions—or civic intermediaries—in which people from all walks of life have a common interest and in which children might come to learn such common values as decency, civility, and respect.

■ Part of being a citizen is exercising one's freedom. Indeed, the freedoms that U.S. citizens enjoy are a democratic inheritance that we too often take for granted. But to be free is not simply to

preferences of the consumer. Education, in my view, is not a consumption item in the same sense as the food we select from the grocery store.

Many homeschoolers would surely protest here that their energetic efforts to overcome numerous obstacles to educate their children at home are motivated by a desire to shield their children from rampant consumerism and to offer their children a moral environment in which they learn deeper and more important values. No doubt this is true.

But my point is not that homeschooling parents are inculcating in their children a consumer mentality. My point is that many homeschooling

parents view the education of their children as a matter properly under their control and no one else's. They feel entitled to "purchase" the education environment of their children from the marketplace of learning materials, with no intermediary between them and their child. The first kind of homeschooler actually does purchase learning materials for the home. The second kind of homeschooler treats the public school system as a provider of services and activities from which parents choose what they want, as if it were a restaurant with an extensive menu.

And this attitude is the crucial point.

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We should not allow a new consumer mentality to become the driving metaphor for the education of our children.

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be free from coercion or constraint. Democratic freedom requires the free construction and possible revision of beliefs and preferences. To become free, students must be exposed to the vibrant diversity of a democratic society so that they possess the liberty to live a life of their own design.

Because homeschooled students receive highly customized educations, designed usually to accord with the preferences of parents, they are least likely in principle to be exposed to materials, ideas, and people that have not been chosen in advance; they are least likely to share common education experiences with other children; and they are most likely to have a narrow horizon of experiences, which can curtail their freedom. Although highly customized education for students may produce satisfied parents as consumers, and even offer excellent academic training to the student, it is a loss from a civic perspective.

Civic Perils

I do not argue that homeschooling undermines citizenship in all cases. On the contrary, I have elsewhere defended the practice of home-

schooling, when properly regulated (Reich, 2002). Many homeschooling parents are deeply committed to providing their children with an education that introduces them to a great diversity of ideas and people. And for those homeschoolers who seek partnerships with public schools, their children do participate in common institutions with other children. I do not intend to condemn homeschooling wholesale, for I have met many homeschooled students who are better prepared for democratic citizenship than the average public school student.

My claim is about the potential civic perils of a homeschooled education, where schooling is customizable down to the tiniest degree. Customization, and, therefore, homeschooling, seem wonderful if we think about education as a consumption item. But schooling, from the time that public schools were founded until today, has served to cultivate democratic citizenship. And though this may be a largely forgotten aim, as many have argued, we should not allow a new consumer mentality to become the driving metaphor for the education of children. ■