

Homeschooling In Uncertain Times: COVID prompts a surge

By William Heuer & William Donovan

Foreword By Kerry McDonald



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Foreword

By Kerry McDonald

In the spring of 2020, millions of families got a sudden and unexpected taste of homeschooling. By the fall of 2020, many of them chose homeschooling voluntarily, unenrolling their children from school for independent homeschooling. Indeed, the US homeschooling rate soared in 2020 from its pre-pandemic levels to more than 11 percent of US school children, according to the US Census Bureau.¹ As a new academic year begins, many of these pandemic-era homeschoolers are not returning to now-open classrooms and will instead continue learning without schooling. It's never been a better time to be a homeschooler, as these families have discovered. They appreciate the personalization of the homeschooling lifestyle over the standardization of a conventional classroom. They recognize the abundant learning materials and educational resources available to them. They value the greater flexibility of their work lives and want to grant the same to their children. In short, homeschooling is poised to continue its dramatic expansion and help reshape the education landscape in profound ways.

Pioneer Institute has been a leader in evaluating homeschooling trends and supporting the rights of parents to remove their children from school for home-based education. Its 2017 paper, "Homeschooling: The Ultimate Choice," provided an important analysis of homeschooling's growth and diversity in the 21st century.² Now, this paper offers a timely glimpse into how the pandemic response has accelerated homeschooling's growth and impact.

My first inkling that homeschooling was about to surge came in April 2020. Just a few weeks after most schools shut down due to coronavirus concerns, EdChoice published the results of a survey finding that more than half of parents had a more favorable opinion of homeschooling than they did prior to the pandemic response.³ I remember thinking that if parents considered emergency pandemic homeschooling to be tolerable, they were sure to be at least curious about the real thing. Sure enough, by August a Gallup poll suggested that the homeschooling rate would double in the 2020/2021 academic year.⁴ A fall *Education Week* survey offered further proof of this doubling, with many low-income parents leading the way in choosing the homeschooling option.⁵

By February 2021, EdChoice's parent survey showed homeschooling's favorability had grown even further, with 63 percent of respondents having a positive impression of

homeschooling.⁶ The same month, the US Census Bureau released its data showing that homeschooling numbers doubled from the spring to the fall of 2020.

Here in Massachusetts, the homeschooling rise was particularly steep, increasing from a rate of 1.5 percent in the spring of 2020 to 12.1 percent in the fall of 2020. In the Boston-Cambridge-Newton, MA-NH area designated by the Census, homeschooling increased from 0.9 percent to 8.9 percent during that timeframe.⁷

The Census data also revealed that the number of Black homeschoolers increased five-fold during this period, and Black students are now over-represented in the homeschooling population compared to the overall K-12 public school population.⁸

Many of these new homeschoolers are not going back. According to Rasheeda Denning, founder of Black Homeschoolers of Central Florida, her new members have found homeschooling to be fulfilling and gratifying. "One common trend that we've noticed during this pandemic is that parents have become empowered," Denning told *redefinED*.⁹

"Some new families will return to traditional schools, but we've found that most of our families are enjoying this new way of schooling and will stay with homeschooling, seeking out support to help them on their journey," she said.

The Associated Press found a similar trend. It reported in July 2021 that many families who selected homeschooling due to the pandemic response learned that they really enjoy this education approach and lifestyle choice. "They're now opting to homeschool their children, even as schools plan to resume in-person classes," the AP concluded.¹⁰

A key factor in the likely sustained increase in homeschooling numbers is the greater flexibility of parent work schedules. Remote work is now much more widely accepted and here to stay.¹¹ As parents have more freedom and flexibility in their work routines, they may choose to extend that freedom and flexibility to their children. Released from a standard work week and a long commute to an office building, these parents now have a greater ability to facilitate their children's learning outside of a standard school setting.

Even if they are still engaged in full-time, office-based work, parents are also finding that they have more homeschooling resources available to them than ever before, enabling them to effectively balance work and homeschooling.

Home-based microschool networks and co-learning communities were gaining traction prior to the pandemic,¹² and have grown in popularity over the past year. Many families discovered during school closures the benefits of these microschools, or “learning pods,” where students gather together in small, multi-age groups, often in private homes, to learn in a more personalized, versatile, and often technology-enabled way.

Now, education entrepreneurs are rising up to meet the immense market demand for out-of-school learning resources. The edtech startup SchoolHouse connects families interested in being part of a learning pod with an experienced teacher to lead the pod in a family’s home or a nearby commercial space. SchoolHouse just raised over \$8 million in venture capital funding in the spring of 2021 and now operates in 10 states.¹³

Similar education startups are also sprouting in Massachusetts. KaiPod Learning, for instance, is a local, early-stage company that creates small, in-person learning communities for students who meet in convenient, physical spaces while using an online learning provider of their choice. These learning pods have adult coaches and tutors to assist the students academically when needed, while also leading social and enrichment activities throughout the day. Founded by Amar Kumar, KaiPod is currently participating in the renowned Silicon Valley Y Combinator startup accelerator program, and ran its first pilot session in Newton, Mass. this summer. The company expects a busy fall as interest in non-traditional education models grows. “I can imagine lots of these learning centers around your community, around your city,” Kumar told me in a recent interview. “You pick the one that works best for you. The kids there know you, they know your family. And that is school. School doesn’t have to be a large building with detention, and bells, and school buses,” he said.¹⁴

Policymakers in Massachusetts and elsewhere should embrace and support these educational startups and the creative learning models they are building. They can reduce regulatory hurdles for entrepreneurs and families, and lessen barriers to entry. For instance, KaiPod has an open-door policy for families that allows them to come and go as they please throughout the day or week. As a result, the startup is not tied to full-time school or childcare regulatory requirements, and currently has an exemption from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. More efforts by state policymakers to limit regulation of out-of-school learning centers and related homeschooling programs would further catalyze education entrepreneurship and innovation.

For roughly a half-century, modern homeschooling families have shown that education can occur successfully and enjoyably outside of traditional schooling. Current research on homeschooling outcomes shows a positive academic impact,¹⁵ and higher rates of “cultural capital,” or community immersion, among homeschoolers compared to children who attend public schools.¹⁶ Now, many of the families who experienced homeschooling in the wake of the coronavirus response are choosing to stick with it for the long-term, while others are just beginning to give it a try.

The COVID-19 pandemic has re-empowered parents in unprecedented ways, putting them back in the driver’s seat of determining the best learning environment for their children. As entrepreneurs recognize the mounting demand for schooling alternatives and invent new educational solutions, more families will be able to join current homeschoolers in opting out of an assigned district school for other, better options. Policymakers should support both parents and entrepreneurs as they seek and create high-quality, personalized education approaches that nurture learning outside of a conventional classroom.

By Kerry McDonald, Senior Education Fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education and author of *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom*.

Executive Summary

By William Heuer & William Donovan

This paper focuses on the increase in families who have chosen to homeschool their children in grades K–12 since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic. School districts in Massachusetts and across the United States reported a sharp increase in enrollment of traditional homeschooling, as opposed to classroom instruction in public schools, charter schools, private schools or other alternatives.

This update includes interviews with families who opted to homeschool their children in the conventional approach, rather than continue with the hasty remote learning that educators tried to transfer from the classroom in March of 2020 and then the blended approach of online learning/classrooms-with-masks format that many districts used during the 2020–2021 school year.

We also point out the rise in homeschooling among Black and other minority families. While they too were influenced by health concerns, often they choose to homeschool because they believe their homes are a safer environment than the halls and grounds of public schools, especially in urban areas. Safety is among the reasons given by so-called “second choice” homeschoolers who switch to homeschooling for pragmatic reasons and not a traditional reason such as religious fundamentalism.

We recognize a notable critic to homeschooling in this paper, present her claims and include comments from a supporter of hers. But we also offer counter points from education columnists in a variety of publications.

This report follows a study we authored in June of 2017, *Homeschooling: The Ultimate School Choice*,¹⁷ also published by the Pioneer Institute. It covered the history of homeschooling, demographics on homeschoolers, the economics around homeschooling and legislation affecting homeschooling.

While it is likely that many of the families that left classroom settings for at least the 2020–2021 school year will return, traditional homeschooling was rapidly growing before the pandemic and is likely to stick. We include several recommendations on how policy makers and education administrators can accommodate that growth and assist families who chose this manner of education for their children.

Among them we urge policy makers and education officials to do more to acknowledge homeschooling as a viable educational choice. Districts and states can do more to provide direction and information for parents who are considering non-traditional options. One suggestion is for state educational departments to add homeschooling information on their websites and link to the statewide homeschooling support groups that exist in all states.

We also look to policy makers and legislators to encourage innovations in alternative education. During the 2020–2021 school year, for example new approaches such as learning pods, micro schools and learning hubs increased dramatically.

Introduction

When the COVID pandemic forced school closures in March of 2020, some 50 million students nationwide were ultimately affected. Harried school officials scrambled to continue educating those students by substituting, in a rush, online and remote learning for in-class instruction. But many parents were horrified to see their children parked in front of a computer screen for hours and dissatisfied with the public school answer to the shutdown.

To them the 2020–2021 school year promised more of the same. More grappling with remote and hybrid education, often for multiple children. More struggles with unsuitable online devices with little or no training to accomplish required tasks. All while trying to adapt to their own altered schedules. Frustrated, many of them pulled their children from the public schools. But to do what?

A popular alternative has been to homeschool. Among the most significant outcomes of the pandemic on K–12 education has been the surge in traditional homeschooling. The flexible, free-thinking, hands-on homeschooling managed by families and not the perceived version of homeschooling that was occurring.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the percentage of households with children being homeschooled rose from 5.4 percent in the spring of the 2019–2020 school year to

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11.1 percent in the fall of the 2020–2021 school year. That’s an increase of 5.6 percentage points and a doubling of U.S. households that were homeschooling.¹⁸

Homeschooling rates especially increased among minorities. The proportion of Black families homeschooling increased by five times from the spring of 2020 to the fall of 2021, from 3.3 percent to 16.1 percent. Hispanic homeschooling families rose from 6.2 percent to 12.1 percent, and Asian homeschoolers jumped from 4.9 percent to 8.8 percent.¹⁹

The surge is likely to continue into the 2021–2022 school year. By mid-summer of 2021, when enrollments were determined and homeschooling parents were devising their education plans, most of the U.S. population still had not received the COVID-19 vaccine. In particular, children below the age of 12 had not been cleared to receive their shots. With news of other countries reinstating shutdowns and the Delta variant of the virus creating spikes in cases in many U.S. states, parents of those younger students were weighing the risks of sending them back to public school vs. the safety of keeping them home.

In the summer of 2020, and no doubt the summer of 2021, homeschooling became a viable alternative for many parents who had considered it in the past or who were curious but never prompted to change. Some saw it as a temporary solution to providing their kids a good education until the virus passes. Others found it was an approach that engaged their children more effectively and brought them closer together as a family.

But homeschoolers were not immune to the lockdown. The modern homeschooler is rarely “at home.” Their “out and about” lives are intertwined with a variety of external opportunities based upon their educational interests. Interactions with other homeschoolers (via co-ops, outdoor “meet-ups,” learning centers), others in the community (in activities such as dance classes, sports, or playgroups on playgrounds), and adult/mentors (such as librarians, museum guides, and internship leaders) represent a significant portion of the homeschooling lifestyle. All were greatly disrupted.

When many of these outlets were forced to cease operations, homeschoolers were significantly impacted. But they did have one advantage. Homeschoolers are accustomed to being with their parent-educator on a daily basis and acclimated to being with their siblings throughout the week. Being restricted to group and individual instruction within the household was not a radical departure from their norm.

But it was for people who were unprepared for education at home. Dealing with family interactions and at-home childcare during remote school hours was particularly stressful for isolated parents adjusting to their own work-at-home schedules. Adapting to multiple classroom assignments across grade levels with no training or background could be overwhelming.

The mixing of remote instruction with planned in-person days often added to the confusion and did not accommodate the schedule of many families.

Early into the pandemic, the plea from parents to have their children return to the classroom was centered on the perceived need for in-person learning, face-to-face interaction and the rejection of online, remote instruction. Ironically, the essence of traditional homeschooling *is* in-person learning and face-to-face interaction with the parent.

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This paper examines the impact of COVID-19 on homeschooling and the migration of families from public schools into the homeschooling approach. It draws on studies and reports produced during the pandemic, interviews with homeschooling parents and work that we’ve done in the past on the topic. It also fully acknowledges that homeschooling is not for everyone, just as attending a public school, a charter school or a virtual school is not suitable for all.

The field of education, like much of life on the planet, has been profoundly influenced by the pandemic. Marc Andreessen, the Silicon Valley entrepreneur, investor and co-founder of Netscape, says that COVID-19 produced a “system shock.” People died, others lost their jobs, companies went out of business. But that shock also changed where people work, how they work, where they socialize and how they learn. They became more willing to try new ideas that they had dismissed in the past. Homeschooling was one of those options.

“People have had a lot of ideas for a long time of things they might like to do differently, they just haven’t had catalysts,” says Andreessen. “COVID as a system shock is an opportunity for a lot of those ideas.”²⁰

Homeschooling history

Though making a switch from public schools might seem like a radical move, the homeschooling concept isn’t radical in the least. Homeschooling is a lifestyle choice, driven by many factors. But the dominant one is the desire of parents to have a much greater say in their child’s education.

As we wrote back in 2017, “There is no typical homeschooler or homeschooling family. The ‘one size fits all’ model that has characterized traditional public schools has been anathema for homeschoolers as they formulate individualized learning plans for each of their children. Their method is not a scalable package in the conventional sense, but rather a proliferation of unique agendas customized to meet the needs of the individual student.”²¹

There’s no homeschooling industry that markets this concept to persuade parents to sign up. The homeschooling way of life often originates via word of mouth and one family at

a time. Social networking, blogs and how-to books authored by homeschoolers have helped parents understand what life is really like when they take the homeschool plunge.

Though homeschooling is legal in every state, each state has its own homeschooling regulations. In Massachusetts, each district sets its own policy for approval of new homeschoolers. For any child of compulsory school age, between six and 16, the homeschooling program must be approved in advance by the superintendent or school committee of that district. There are no teacher qualifications required of parents, but the state does mandate that certain subjects be taught and that students meet assessment requirements.

Homeschooling has been legal in all 50 states since 1933. But contemporary homeschooling can trace its roots to the 1970s and 1980s and the work of two education reformers who were critical of the public school approach.

Dr. Raymond Moore argued against California's plan to lower the compulsory attendance age to two years and nine months and produced research that showed the negative impact of schooling on young children. In 1975 his book *Better Late Than Early* promoted homeschooling and gained the support of Christian homeschoolers. Around the same time, John Holt, an author and educator who'd written two popular books — *How Children Fail* and *How Children Learn*—became a homeschooling proponent. He invented the phrase “unschooling” to describe the child-centered approach he espoused. After Holt appeared on the Phil Donahue Show in 1981, more than 10,000 letters arrived seeking more information about homeschooling.²²

And a humorous but influential bit of positive publicity occurred in 1983 that also gave homeschooling a boost. Grant Colfax, a homeschooler who raised goats on his family's farm in California, was accepted to an Ivy League school. “Goat Boy Goes to Harvard,” blared one national headline.²³

In addition to advocacy, a number of important court decisions over more than 100 years have helped to clear a path for homeschooling today. Massachusetts was the first state to require every city and town to establish a public school for all children between the ages of 8 and 14. This schooling was required to be in session at least 12 weeks annually, with six of those weeks being consecutive.

*The Commonwealth v Roberts*²⁴ case in 1893 determined that state law permitted instruction “by the parents themselves, provided it is given in good faith and sufficient in extent.” In 1899 the state law was changed to read: “but if such a child

has attended for a like period of time a private day school approved by the school committee or if such child has been *otherwise instructed* for a like period of time in the branches of learning...”

Then in 1913 the Massachusetts School Superintendents Association petitioned for legislation regarding school attendance and the employment of minors. Again, the statute's wording was changed to “otherwise instructed in a manner approved in advance by the superintendent or the school committee.”

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1922 in the case of *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, that compulsory attendance statutes could not restrict students to attending only public

schools. Fifty years later, in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the Supreme Court sided with several Amish families who refused to send their children to school beyond eighth grade due to their religious beliefs, thereby supporting the argument that parents have the ultimate responsibility to decide the best course of education for their children.

COVID and K–12 Education

Not surprisingly, the shutdown of public schools that began in March of 2020 and the hasty transition to online and remote learning were powerful disruptions to student routines and focus. Across the country classes were paused while teachers and administrators scrambled to move online. In many districts the shift to learning at home was delayed to purchase tablets for needy students and ensure that others had internet access.

When the new academic year began in the fall of 2020, student engagement was down and absenteeism was up. As the year progressed test scores showed most students making some learning gains in reading and math since the pandemic started. But the math scores were still about five to 10 percentile points lower than students in the same grade before COVID-19, according to a report by the Northwest Evaluation Association, a Portland, OR-based nonprofit.²⁵

In June of 2021 the federal Department of Education released a report stating that there was “emerging evidence that the pandemic has negatively affected academic growth, widening pre-existing disparities. In core subjects like math and reading, there are worrisome signs that in some grades students might be falling even further behind pre-pandemic expectations.”²⁶

Seeing the test scores, watching their children struggle and

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skeptical of how a second wave of the virus might be handled by the districts, many parents who had looked at homeschooling decided it was time to take a chance.

“They felt the level of instruction was not up to par and that schools dropped the ball during the transition,” said Luis Huerta, professor of education and public policy at Teachers College at Columbia University. “That led many parents to reconsider, at least temporarily, that they need to take control of their children’s education.”²⁷

When they decided to change, they found an experienced community anxious to help. It included numerous homeschooling support groups and homeschooling social networking organizations such as the Massachusetts Homeschoolers Network²⁸ and the MHLA Massachusetts Homeschooling Community.²⁹ These groups provide webinars and experienced homeschool contacts to support the transition to homeschooling. They also provide valuable information on the variety of homeschooling practices that have proven successful over the years.

Pandemic Homeschoolers - Molly McPherson

When Massachusetts public schools closed in March of 2020 and students were sent home, Molly McPherson immediately saw that remote learning was not going to work. Two of her three children, ages 12, 10 and 7, cope with hearing loss. To work remotely they needed closed captioning, but the service the Chelmsford, MA, school they attended was using did not include that.

In the past she never considered private schooling because her kids needed specific assistance, such as acoustic accommodations and speech and language services. But by May she realized she needed to opt out for at least a year. The expected protocols at the school would make it difficult for her children with hearing issues to learn from teachers wearing masks.

“I figured we’d do it for the year and track what the school was doing so we could reintegrate them in the fall or whenever,” said McPherson. “As I started trying to find the right curriculum for my oldest daughter it became clear I had no idea of what her actual abilities were, specifically in Math.”³⁰

Her daughter was in the fifth grade when the pandemic occurred and earning As and Bs in math. But when McPherson attempted to place her daughter in a curriculum, she was coming up with a placement at the start of a fourth-grade curriculum and close to third grade. She tried a different assessment tool and got the same result.

She questioned her daughter’s teacher and was told that the discrepancy had to do with accommodations her daughter was receiving and consideration of what was expected of students.

“We had worked so hard to keep our kids afloat up until the point of the pandemic. I thought that, at least if we homeschooled, they wouldn’t drown.”

“I lost my confidence in what an A or B really means,” says McPherson. “I had no idea of how my children were functioning. When my daughter and I started doing Math together, she literally had Math trauma. She’d start to cry. She couldn’t

add and subtract fluently in digits from one to nine. She needed to use her fingers.”

Alarmed, she pulled back for a month and just did what she could do. McPherson looked for a curriculum that didn’t overwhelm her daughter and helped to build her confidence and her competence. McPherson started homeschooling her three children on July 22, 2020 and finished on May 18, 2021 using the Classical Conversations homeschool program. She joined a community of Christian faith-based users of the curriculum. They met in family groups and social distanced.

“It was perfect for my kids’ learning style,” she said. “Lots of repetition, vocabulary and language-rich, so we could focus.”

McPherson says it took time to “learn how to make (homeschooling) work.” But she eventually decided it was well-suited for her children with hearing problems. In school they spent considerable energy on functioning, listening, trying to understand what was being said. At the end of the school day, they had “zero” energy to do anything else such as sports, Girl Scouts or simply having friends over.

“At home they don’t have the listening fatigue,” she says. “They don’t have the background noise. They don’t have to listen to a teacher from 12 feet away. They’re not as exhausted. So they have all this nice energy and capacity to start exploring who they are besides a student.”

Her education plan for the new school year included more monthly field trips, now that places such as museums and theaters are open again, and more extracurricular activities.

“We had worked so hard to keep our kids afloat up until the point of the pandemic. I thought that, at least if we homeschooled, they wouldn’t drown,” she says. “We knew our kids would not be able to learn by anything offered by the school. They would be left behind and it would be very hard to get back to where we needed to be.”

Pandemic Homeschoolers - Davina Owens

Davina Owens is an estate planning attorney in Sharon, MA and her husband is a public school teacher. She says they are “fans” of public schools. But when she saw that her two sons, ages fourteen and nine, were spending their days in front of a computer screen when their school shut down, she knew they would not do well.

Her legal work required her to spend some portion of each day in her law office. Affording high level child care for her

sons and her four-year-old daughter did not make financial sense. Though they had “toyed” with the idea of homeschooling several years earlier, they never made the change. But the pandemic forced her to reconsider. The factors weighed in favor of homeschooling.

“The world was different,” says Owens. “Everything was changed. The only thing that was the same was that I valued education and I love my kids. So with all of that I said ‘Why not try something new this year? It can only be a year and it doesn’t matter because no one is getting a great education this year. So if I fail, whatever failing is in homeschooling, they’ll go back next year, pretty much no harm, no foul.’ So I gave myself permission to try.”³¹

Owens worked with her sons in the morning, using a curriculum called “Gather ‘Round Home School,” a Christian unit-study program that can be used with children from the pre-reading stage through Grade 12. In the afternoon she went to her job, feeling as though her kids had learned more than if they had been “zoned out in front of a remote teacher.”

Financial considerations will determine how long she continues homeschooling. Initially she saw it as a one-year stop-gap. Now she’s not so sure.

“[Homeschooling] is something I think I always understood,” she says. “The pedagogy of having a focused education and school 24-hours a day or creating learning experiences out of life has always been our family mentality. I’ve always done that with my kids, and they love working hands-on and having all the attention in the world.”

Second Choice Homeschoolers

While many parents choose homeschooling for a traditional reason such as Christian fundamentalism, parents such as Molly McPherson and Davina Owens migrated to homeschooling because of a change in circumstances. Many “second choice homeschoolers” choose this alternative for pragmatic reasons such as concerns about the environment at their public school or the way their children were being taught at the local public or private schools.

As researcher Jennifer Lois identified and described in her book *Home Is Where The School Is*, these parents rarely viewed homeschooling as their primary educational choice, but rather as a short-term solution until current conditions change and they can reach their ultimate goal: a better school situation for their child.³² The pandemic has clearly exacerbated the educational predicament imposed upon parents and many of their decisions are consistent with those of Lois’ “second choice homeschoolers.”

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Despite the complications of opting for homeschooling, such as the loss of income and the interruption of goals that young or middle-age parents might have, these people were helping to power the growth in homeschooling before the COVID surge occurred. Data about second-choice homeschoolers is hard to come by, but it’s telling that about 50 percent of homeschooling families do not homeschool all their children. They send at least one of their other children to a private, charter or traditional public school.³³ This would be consistent with the trend of parents opting for a greater educational match with the individual learning style of each of their offspring as opposed to the standard “one-size fits all” perception of the public school district.

Research prior to the pandemic also showed that about one-third of homeschooled students return to school each year.³⁴ That would suggest that more children than once was thought have experienced homeschooling, since the overall population of homeschooled students continues to climb.

Converts to Critics

While the pandemic has turned many parents who were skeptical of homeschooling into practitioners, critics remain. Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Bartholet, who is also a child welfare expert, called for sweeping changes in homeschooling in an article in the *Arizona Law Review*. In the paper, entitled “Homeschooling: Parent Rights Absolutism vs. Child Rights to Education & Protection,”³⁵ she argues that the lack of regulation in the homeschooling system creates a danger to children and society.

“Parents can now keep their children at home in the name of homeschooling free from any real scrutiny as to whether or how they are educating their children,” she wrote. “Many homeschool because they want to isolate their children from ideas and values central to our democracy, determined to keep their children from exposure to views that might enable autonomous choice about their future lives. Many promote racial segregation and female subservience. Many question science. Abusive parents can keep their children at home free from the risk that teachers will report them to child protection services. Some homeschool precisely for this reason.”³⁶

She believes that the rapid spread of homeschooling is due to the growth in the conservative evangelical movement. “Conservative Christians wanted the chance to bring their children up with their values and belief systems and saw homeschooling as a way to escape from the secular education in public schools,” she told the *Harvard Gazette* in May of 2020.³⁷

Bartholet says there is a strong connection between homeschooling and maltreatment. Other dangers are that “children are simply not learning basic academic skills or learning about the most basic democratic values of our society or getting the kind of exposure to alternative views that enables them to exercise meaningful choice about their future lives.”³⁸

Her solution is to place a “presumptive ban” on homeschooling. She would allow exceptions for situations in which homeschooling is needed and appropriate, such as when a child is an exceptional athlete or schools in an area are inadequate to serve children’s needs, where students are at risk of bullying or racism, or where children with disabilities cannot receive needed services. But if parents want an exception, they’ll need to make their case.

“Parents should have a significant burden of justification for a requested exception,” she wrote in the *Arizona Law Review*. “There is no other way to ensure that children receive an education or protection against maltreatment at all comparable to that provided to public school children.”³⁹

Bartholet further says that parents “should also demonstrate that they’re qualified to provide an adequate education and that they would provide an education comparable in scope to what is required in public schools.”⁴⁰

Not surprising the article caused an uproar within the homeschooling community, with homeschooling proponents leaping into action and few allies defending Bartholet’s views. One who did speak up was Lindsey T. Powell, a patent administrator in the Office of Technology Development at Harvard University. Powell, a graduate of Harvard, was homeschooled starting in the third grade.

“Responsible homeschooling has a place in the academic realm,” Powell wrote in the *Harvard Crimson*. “But far too often, parents choose to homeschool based on an idealized narrative of close families, high test scores, and perfectly sheltered children, without considering the risks of intense groupthink and social isolation.”

Recalling her experience, Powell wrote that “I realize that many of my ‘unique opportunities’ would have been available to me in a traditional school setting. I participated in Bible studies, tennis lessons, and even successfully lobbied my state legislature to amend the adolescent driving curfew.

“But homeschooling, even with these experiences, came with a dangerous sense of isolation and an inappropriate self-emphasis on productivity to compensate for missing out on ‘normal’ rites of passage,” she added. “Homeschool prom is just as it sounds, and a graduation of three is quite the letdown after twelve years of hard work.”⁴¹

Few others joined her publicly, however. Homeschooling backers rallied to oppose Bartholet’s paper. Columnists at

National Review, *The Federalist*, *National Catholic Register* and *Fox News* railed against several points within the paper, often focusing on her call for a presumptive ban.

Writing in *Forbes* magazine, Mike McShane, director of national research at EdChoice and the author of 10 books on education policy, called the presumptive ban on homeschooling “a solution in search of a problem.” He added that “the best (though imperfect) data we have show no greater risk of abuse for homeschooled students.”⁴²

“Banning homeschooling would thrust thousands of children who left traditional schools to avoid maltreatment back into the very schools where they were victimized,” he wrote. “It will narrow the options available to families to find the environment that best meets their child’s needs. And, it will undermine the very pluralism that our nation is founded upon.”

We have written⁴³ that the isolation that Bartholet implies and the contention that parental influence of the homeschooling environment would skew the tolerance level of homeschooling students to the detriment of society, is untrue. An earlier study has shown just the opposite, that homeschoolers exhibit more political tolerance than their public school peers.⁴⁴

There’s also an economic argument to be made against a ban on homeschooling. Recognizing that homeschooling involves millions of students, some cost estimates can be made on the impact homeschooling has on education in the United States.

In early 2020, there were two million homeschooled students. Since it costs the average school system about \$10,000 to \$15,000⁴⁵ to educate each current student, these two million homeschooled students would add \$20 billion to \$30 billion *per year* to school costs. Using the Household Pulse Survey Data from the US Census at the end of February, 2021, estimates of over five million homeschooled students⁴⁶ would project that cost to \$50 billion to \$75 billion. Over a 13-year time span (K–12), this would total nearly \$1 trillion.

Additionally, the average classroom size is roughly 20–25 students.⁴⁷ Another two million students would require 80,000 more teachers (200,000 more if we use that same Census estimate). At a conservative salary estimate of \$65,000 per teacher,⁴⁸ the additional cost could be as high as another \$13 billion per year.

Furthermore, the average U.S. public school has a student population of 500.⁴⁹ Banning homeschooling and integrating homeschoolers into the public system would require the building of 4,000 to 10,000 additional schools. With school construction in the \$30–60 million range,⁵⁰ that would be another \$120 billion up to \$500 billion of cost.

Certainly the surge in homeschooling prompted by COVID-19 was an aberration in terms of its size. But the steady trend upward in families turning to homeschooling is undeniable.

A Blip or a Turning Point

Certainly the surge in homeschooling prompted by COVID-19 was an aberration in terms of its size. But the steady trend upward in families turning to homeschooling is undeniable. Still to be seen is the percentage of families that will return to public schools after pulling out for a year or more.

Kerry McDonald, a senior education fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education and author of “Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom,”⁵¹ says the uncertainty of the virus and how schools will manage it is weighing on the minds of parents.

“We’re already seeing now back to school plans, in some cases where school districts are saying that they’ll be doing masks or they’ll go back to remote learning or social distancing if various variants become problematic,” McDonald said in July of 2021. “I think many parents are saying this fall is going to be as unpredictable as last fall, let’s continue with home schooling, or a lot of parents might be considering it more.”⁵²

McDonald and Andreessen, the Silicon Valley entrepreneur, both see broader changes happening in education that will lead to more homeschooling.

“There are increasingly more resources now and in the future for homeschoolers to make this easier,” says McDonald. “Certainly there will be more investments in online learning and education startups that will facilitate the process of parents taking their children out of school.”⁵³

Andreessen believes watching their children struggle with remote learning and seeing public schools trying to transfer their model through the internet during the pandemic, has been an eye opener for parents.

“I think for a lot of parents of K–12 students it was the first time they saw what they were getting in the classroom at that level in many, many years,” he says. “It feels like we’re on the front end of a pretty dramatic homeschooling boom. You have parents saying, ‘I’m not sending my kids back to that.’”⁵⁴

But what of the argument of some skeptics that many of the pandemic parents who produced the homeschooling surge, did so somewhat whimsically believing they couldn’t do any worse than what public schools were offering. Shouldn’t there be more to education than a parent buying a software program and taking the kids on field trips?

McDonald claims the opposite.

“I would argue that [whimsy] is what most parents engage in when they enroll their kids in an assigned district school,” she says. “They’re not giving much thought at all to the education their kids are getting, they’re just following government

orders. So in this case parents were put back in charge of their children’s education in ways unimaginable pre-pandemic, and they took that opportunity to provide the best education possible for their kids by, in many cases, utilizing online learning resources, many of which are free or low cost.”

“Historically, compulsory government schooling is the experiment,” she adds. “Homeschooling has certainly predated that. This is parents choosing private education options as opposed to government schooling.”

Summary and Conclusions

We are living in the age of disruption. And have generally attributed the root cause to be technology. Even our educational system had been predicted to succumb and re-generate itself via technological innovation. Little did we know that in the midst of this technological process, the real disruption in education would be instigated by COVID.

While the devastating effects of the COVID pandemic will have generational ramifications, on the educational front

school closures had a major impact on how parents and families viewed the traditional school systems. Just about everyone experienced an educational aspect formerly associated with those who were traditionally homeschooled. Whether that be more interaction between child and parent in a learning environment, online learning, self-directed initiatives, increased social time with siblings, independent project work, or just more personal time to pursue individual curiosity, it quickly became apparent that there are viable alternatives to traditional public schools and that mil-

lions were intrigued with those possibilities.

Although a number of alternatives such as private/parochial schools, charters, vocational schools and virtual schools saw varying degrees of upticks,⁵⁵ by far the most significant increase was in the homeschool sector.⁵⁶ Many families took advantage of the opportunity to experiment with homeschooling with little downside during the pandemic year enjoying the flexibility it offered during a time that imposed so many other constraints on the family unit.

The larger question becomes whether these massive gains in homeschooling are sustainable. As society starts a return to normalcy and prepares for the upcoming 2021–2022 school year, it would be naïve to believe that all those increases would be maintained. However, it would seem equally naïve to think that the roughly 3 percent annual increase in homeschooling that was consistently established over the last pre-pandemic decade would cease.

In addition, some portion of the large gains will also be

In addition, some portion of the large gains will also be sustained as families are increasingly making educational decisions based on what they believe is best for each individual child rather than default to the “one size fits all” public system.

sustained as families are increasingly making educational decisions based on what they believe is best for each individual child rather than default to the “one size fits all” public system. While there will be parents who may desire to continue to homeschool their children yet due to economic and family work issues cannot do so, others have seen the benefits and will make the necessary adjustments to fulfill those educational goals.

Still other families, notably Blacks and Hispanics who have led the homeschooling surge, realized that a safer and more comfortable home environment with a parent is more advantageous than public schools with terrible facilities, metal detectors, poor teaching, rampant bullying and a myriad of issues that have been well documented over the years.

Despite some dramatic headlines calling for a “presumptive ban” on homeschooling, during the past year nearly every family was exposed to some element connected to the homeschooling process and was able to experience at least some of the benefits. This reflects a changing attitude and appreciation for an educational philosophy that is centered on the individual student needs and is often self-directed. It also recognizes that parental choice in what is best for their children is a viable option to the current public system. In fact, expanding and supporting these options should be the preferred path rather than any ban or regulation that would impede the growth of homeschooling.

Furthermore, with homeschooling having attained “critical mass” years ago, arguably on par with parochial or charter school participation, the economics of banning homeschooling and forcing those students back into the public system would be disastrous in terms of cost as well as the negative reaction from homeschoolers having their educational choice revoked.

We have argued incessantly over the past few years over the inane fixation of the general public surrounding the question “How many are there?” which has hounded homeschoolers for decades. While it was difficult enough back then to even guess “how many” when there were probably less than 10,000 practitioners, it is virtually impossible today with no universal definition of homeschooling and thus no way to officially count what can’t be defined. Compounding the situation, many states require no notice thus homeschooling becomes “self-defined” in those areas. Even in highly regulated states such as Massachusetts, the reporting mechanism leaves a lot to be desired since there are no dollars associated with the process and no incentive for accuracy.

More importantly, a count should be fairly irrelevant. More attention should be placed in assuring that those homeschoolers who have made this choice are supported in educating their children in the way they see as the best fit for their success. At the very least, providing the information parents need to make appropriate decisions and not encountering unnecessary roadblocks in their endeavors.

Recommendations

Acknowledge homeschooling as a viable educational choice. In our first paper we said it was time to give homeschooling the recognition it deserves. Four years later we repeat that recommendation. As all states permit homeschooling, it has become a viable educational alternative. Yet districts and states can do more to provide direction and information for parents who are considering non-traditional options. State educational departments should add homeschooling information on their websites and link to the statewide homeschooling support groups that exist in all states. Districts should include homeschooling organizations to make presentations at their “open house” sessions when they showcase educational options for upcoming years so that parents have all the info needed to make choices for their children. Furthermore, both the NEA (National Education Association) and the AFT (American Federation of Teachers) remain adamant that only certified teachers should be responsible for the education of students. This self-serving stance of both the major teacher’s union and the largest professional group of teachers in the country appears to be out-of-sync with the general population which seems to have accepted homeschooler choice. It is time that these anachronistic concepts are modernized to meet the needs of the future. Parental choice would be enhanced and publicly funded schools could actually save money if homeschooling was given unbiased recognition.

Districts should support families that choose homeschooling. Public school administrators aren’t expected to be promoters of homeschooling, but neither should they be obstructionists. Homeschooling is a big step for most families as they take on the responsibility of scheduling, curriculum and instructing. Once they take that step, it is in the best interest of the student for public school administrators to be cooperative and provide assistance in whatever ways possible. In Massachusetts, the school superintendent is legally responsible to the state to ensure that all students of compulsory attendance age are being educated. A number of districts permit homeschoolers to participate in extra-curricular (eg: sports, arts, music, after-school programs etc). These opportunities should be available to all tax-paying parents. If districts are serious in their commitment to provide the best for all students, they should offer at least some “professional development” classes/courses each school year for parents to assist them in their endeavors to homeschool their children.

Encourage innovations in alternative education. During the 2020–2021 school year learning pods, micro schools, learning hubs etc increased dramatically. In pre-pandemic days, traditional homeschoolers utilized homeschooling co-ops to accomplish similarly shared academic objectives. At first it was wealthy families pooling their money, but soon non-profits banded together to provide similar opportunities for low-income students. In Boston, four organizations run by

Black and Latino nonprofit leaders serving primarily low-income Black and Latino children formed the Learning Collaborative to open a dozen free pods in the city.⁵⁷ Policymakers and legislators should encourage such innovative thinking and provide funding to enable it.

Since in MA homeschoolers are ineligible to take the MCAS (and rightly so, as this was designed to evaluate the public schools), they are thus deprived of the opportunity to benefit from the Abigail Adams scholarships to MA state schools of higher education. The state legislature should level the playing field by creating an alternative option which would provide some of those scholarships to homeschoolers.

We should also redefine a successful education in light of homeschooling experiences. While few, if any, studies over the years show homeschoolers perform worse than public school students, parents routinely cite that their children are happier, less stressed, and more engaged when learning in a home environment. While parents value these aspects, they are hard to measure. Thus schools tend not to factor them into evaluations. While there seems to be some public school progress in recognizing SEL (Social Emotional Learning) and at least giving lip service to the “parent’s are first teachers” concept, homeschoolers may have paved the way in this awareness and schools should build upon it.

Learn from homeschooling families. Parents choose homeschooling for a variety of reasons that can range from dissatisfaction with remote learning, and concerns for the safety of their children (on the negative side) to the benefits of individualized learning and parental involvement (on the positive side). While individualization is not easily scalable in the public school environment, dismissing this concern of parents would be a mistake in light of the recent statistics showing a decline in public school attendance and the increase in alternatives stressing individual needs such as vocational schools as well as homeschooling. A survey of families who have recently switched to homeschooling would likely provide many constructive steps educators could take to improve public schools. A home and a school room will never be the same. But the basic approach of homeschool learning — an awareness of the world around us — could make public school education more attractive for parents who can’t take the time off to home school. At every level (national, state and local), homeschool organizations and homeschool parents should not be excluded from a seat at the table of education reform.

End the “socialization” myth. For decades, homeschoolers have realized that “schooling” and “education” are not synonymous. Based upon the public response during the pandemic, this concept is finally taking hold in the general populace. However, a mindset associating “schooling” and “socialization” has erroneously arisen as a result of COVID isolation and the effect of “pseudo-homeschooling” (ie: Homeschooling without the socialization aspects of traditional homeschooling which includes co-ops, museums, libraries, group outdoor activities, sports etc.) For a number of those who experienced the academic success of homeschooling but look to return to the public system for the “socialization” there is a misconception that has been engendered over the years that schools are the source of filling the social needs of our students. Traditional homeschoolers would strongly disagree. It is unfortunate that COVID isolation has contributed to perpetuating this myth.

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