

# Homeschooling: The Ultimate School Choice

by William Heuer & William Donovan



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## Executive Summary

Although many may be surprised at the growth of homeschooling during the past few decades, the real surprise is probably how that growth happened and that it continues. Home school advocates and practitioners have succeeded despite a lack of funding, recruiting efforts, publicity, and grant money from philanthropic billionaires. Meanwhile they've faced opposition from the National Education Association (NEA), obstacles imposed by individual school districts and various state restrictions, regulations, and requirements. There is also little if any professional development for parent-instructors and virtually no future career path (or pensions) for those parents. Systemically, there is a lack of institutional knowledge with which to keep the homeschooling movement going forward.

Other alternatives to traditional public school have encountered some of these same impediments, yet homeschooling has survived and prospered over the past half-century in the face of all these challenges.

Unlike private, parochial, and even charter schools, there is no marketing to entice parents to homeschool. The homeschooling way of life often originates via word of mouth and the old-fashioned way: one client at a time. Social networking, homeschooling blogs, and the abundance of how-to books authored by homeschoolers also have helped parents understand the realities of a homeschool lifestyle.

This paper will attempt to elucidate some of these issues by reviewing a brief history of homeschooling, the challenges associated with defining and counting homeschoolers, the predominant reasons for homeschooling, and the critical role parental choice plays in the decision to homeschool.

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.

While the tutorial aspects and advantages of homeschooling are difficult to replicate in the public system because they are expensive, there are many innovative components of homeschooling that could be replicated in the traditional school environment.

Homeschooling is a viable alternative for the many students and their families who wish to opt out of traditional public schools. Regardless of a family's rationale for homeschooling,

the universal tenet of homeschoolers is the importance of parental choice and the conviction that parents are best equipped to make the educational decisions that affect their children.

## History

The notion that modern homeschooling harkens back to the era before compulsory education, when "schooling" occurred when an itinerant schoolmaster arrived in town and children learned basic reading and "cyphering" from their parents, is a simplistic one. In those days most children simply followed in their parents footsteps: girls would learn how to run a household and boys would take up the occupation of their father. This model of homespun homeschooling was based on family necessity and schooling occurred by happenstance. Today's homeschooling is not a revival of the past but a conscious lifestyle choice influenced by many factors.

Homeschooling as the ultimate in parental choice also epitomizes the concept of local control of education. Since education is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, the text of the 10<sup>th</sup> Amendment effectively places it in the hands of the states:

"The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states respectively, or to the people." Even though homeschooling has been legal in all 50 states since 1993, states have attempted to exert local control by establishing a mish-mash of rules and regulations for homeschooling families.

While 13 states have homeschooling statutes and 10 states require or permit homeschoolers to function as private schools, 11 states require no notification that a family is homeschooling.<sup>1</sup> In five states (including Massachusetts) homeschooling is conducted under the "otherwise instructed" provision of the compulsory attendance statute with no explicit mention of homeschooling. No state mandates that homeschool parents have a college degree.

There are 14 states that permit part-time homeschooling at a public school, seven prohibit it, and the rest leave it up to individual school districts. Twenty-three states (plus the District of Columbia) require that homeschoolers be tested.<sup>2</sup> Twenty-two states allow homeschoolers to participate in extracurricular activities in their local school, seven prohibit those activities, and the remainder leave it up to the district.<sup>3</sup> While 21 states ban homeschoolers from participating in high school sports 19 permit it (and five more grant permission if the homeschooler is participating in dual enrollment). Five states (including Massachusetts) permit athletic participation with district approval.

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As the first state to enact a Compulsory Attendance statute in 1852, Massachusetts mandated schooling by requiring 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 for a minimum of 12 weeks each year with six of those weeks being consecutive.

The architect of this revolutionary concept was Horace Mann, known as the “Father of American Education” as well as the “Father of the Common School.” However, historian Milton Gaither notes: “Ironically, some of the very people pushing so strongly for common schools that would raise the masses up to the level of the middle-class Protestant consensus were tutoring their own children at home out of a fear that these very masses would corrupt their own kids. One such individual was Horace Mann himself, whose wife Mary taught their three children at home even as he stumped the country preaching the common school.”<sup>4</sup>

Even more ironic was Horace Mann biographer Jonathan Messerli noting that,

“From a hundred platforms, Mann had lectured that the need for better schools was predicated upon the assumption that parents could no longer be entrusted to perform their traditional roles in moral training and that a more systematic approach within the public school was necessary. Now as a father, he fell back on the educational responsibilities of the family, hoping to make the fireside achieve for his own son what he wanted the schools to accomplish for others.”<sup>5</sup>

This hypocrisy of maintaining parental choice for himself while advocating a system of public education for others seems eerily similar to the mindset that is so common today: Many people of means who can choose to live in districts with better schools or opt for private schools resist giving educational choices to those less fortunate.

Since the advent of the compulsory attendance statute in Massachusetts, a number of key court decisions helped pave the way for the homeschooling we experience today. In 1893, the *Commonwealth v Roberts*<sup>6</sup> decision found that state law permitted instruction “by the parents themselves, provided it is given in good faith and sufficient in extent.” Six years later, the “otherwise instructed” wording appeared for the first time when the relevant section of 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, upon petition from the Massachusetts School Superintendents Association for legislation relative to school attendance and the employment of minors, the statute’s wording was changed to “otherwise instructed in a manner *approved*

in advance by the superintendent or the school committee.”

Today, Massachusetts and Rhode Island are the only two “approval” states in the country, meaning that an education plan with an assessment process must be submitted to the district and be approved before homeschooling can begin.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, the school committee delegates approval to the superintendent, who is responsible for every child in the district under the compulsory attendance statute. In Massachusetts, since the superintendent has responsibility for all students and the approval process also applies to private schools, homeschoolers are not being singled out by needing to be approved.

While the 1922 US Supreme Court decision in *Pierce v Society of Sisters*<sup>8</sup> ruled that compulsory attendance statutes could not restrict students to attending only public schools, it was *Wisconsin v Yoder*,<sup>9</sup> a decision handed down 50 years later that furthered the argument that parents have the ultimate responsibility to determine how best to educate their children. In *Yoder*, the Supreme Court agreed with several Amish families who refused to send their children to school beyond eighth grade due to their religious beliefs. A basis was being established to support exceptions to traditional schooling.

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a confluence of events set the stage for the surge in homeschooling. Contemporary homeschooling can trace its roots to the 1970s and ’80s. Although a number of education reformers at that time were highly critical of public schooling, two were notable for becoming convinced that reform was not the answer and they became the pioneers of the homeschooling movement.

Dr. Raymond Moore was appalled by California’s attempt to lower the compulsory attendance age to two years and nine months. His research on the negative effects of schooling on young children resulted in the publication of *Better Late Than Early* in 1975,<sup>10</sup> his advocacy of homeschooling, and his prominence as an early hero of Christian homeschoolers.

Meanwhile, John Holt, after writing *How Children Fail*<sup>11</sup> and *How Children Learn*,<sup>12</sup> came to the conclusion that schools couldn’t be reformed. He became a homeschool proponent

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and coined the term “unschooling” to reflect the child-centered approach he advocated. In 1977, while working in Boston, he established *Growing Without Schooling*, the first national homeschooling newsletter and essentially became the spokesman for secular homeschoolers.

Positive publicity during these years was sporadic but it did bring homeschooling to the attention of the public. When Grant Colfax, a homeschooler who raised goats on his family’s farm in California, was accepted to an Ivy League institution in 1983, it made national headlines: “Goat Boy Goes To Harvard.”<sup>13</sup> Holt’s 1981 appearance on the Phil Donahue Show generated 10,000 letters seeking more information on the homeschooling phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile support groups and homeschooling organizations were also starting to come into existence.

## The legal aspects of homeschooling in Massachusetts are based on several significant court cases brought during these formative years of modern homeschooling.

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a national Christian-based organization founded in 1983, provides legal advocacy for homeschoolers. Throughout the 1980s, statewide organizations such as the Massachusetts Home Learning Association (MHLA), which was established in 1987, were forming to assist families navigate homeschooling procedures in their respective states.

The legal aspects of homeschooling in Massachusetts are based on several significant court cases brought during these formative years of modern homeschooling. In *Perchemliades v Frizzle*, a 1978 Superior Court decision, the superintendent of schools in Amherst was overruled in his rationale for disapproving an education plan submitted by a homeschooling family.<sup>15</sup> The court specified that the district could not consider the lack of a plan identical to that of the public school, a lack of socialization, fear of setting a precedent, or the parents’ reason for wishing to homeschool. The latter factor clarified that the “otherwise instructed” provision in the Commonwealth’s statute was not conditioned on religious beliefs, as had been the situation in prior national cases brought before the US Supreme Court.

Two subsequent rulings by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) outlined the approval process and solidified the manner in which homeschooling functions in the Commonwealth today. The *Charles Decision* (*Care and Protection of Charles*, 1987<sup>16</sup>) reaffirmed the approval process but cautioned districts that approval must not be conditioned on requirements that are NOT essential to the Commonwealth’s interest that all children should be educated. It proceeded to expand

on these essentials: the district may request a proposed curriculum (along with the hours of instruction in each of the proposed subjects) and may have access to materials being used (but only to determine the type of subjects and grade level for comparison purposes). Instruction shall be equal in “thoroughness and efficiency, and in the progress made therein, as that in the public school of the same town...” The district may consider the length of the homeschool year and the competency of the parents (but neither certification nor a college degree is required). An assessment process should be specified in the education plan, although alternative means of evaluating a child’s progress, such as periodic progress reports or dated work samples, may be substituted for the formal testing process.

A decade later, the SJC’s *Brunelle Decision* (*Brunelle v Lynn Public Schools – 1998*<sup>17</sup>) affirmed the *Charles* ruling and also declared that a home visit is NOT presumptively essential to the protection of the Commonwealth’s interest in seeing that children receive an education, and thus such visits may not be required as a condition for approval. The SJC also took the opportunity to note that “teaching methods may be less formalized, but the home setting may be more effective than those used in the classroom because the teacher-to-student ratio is maximized... (the state) cannot apply institutional standards to this non-institutionalized setting.”

Since *Brunelle*, there has been neither further legislation nor significant court cases, and homeschooling continues to operate under the precedents set by these three decisions.

## How Many Are There?

There’s an old saying that is apropos to homeschooling: “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

Hardly any discussion of homeschooling is complete without hearing the question, “How many homeschoolers are there?” In 1980, educational theorist and homeschooling advocate John Holt answered by replying “Nobody knows, but I’d guess somewhere close to 10,000 families.”

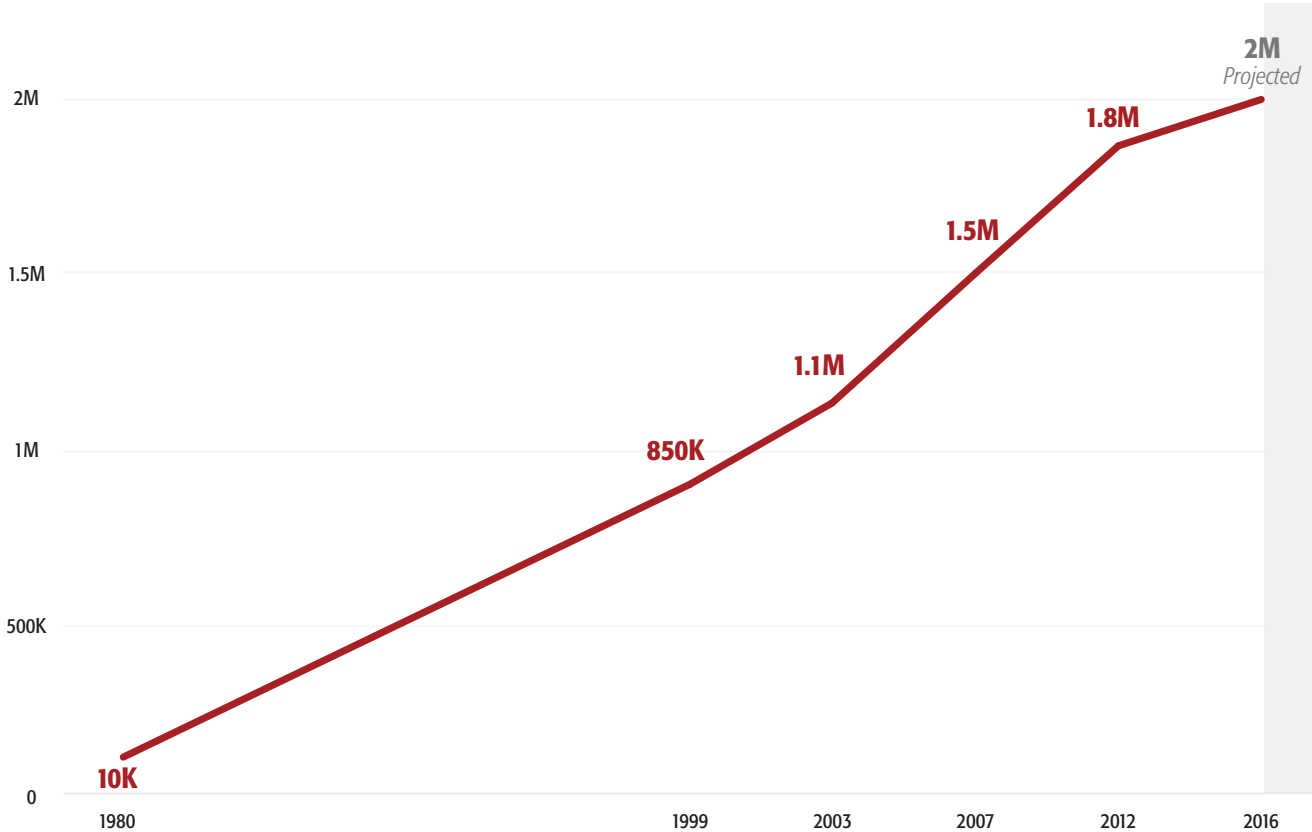
Now, some 35 years later, the parents of over two million children in the United States believe education is too important to be left to the educators, and are adhering to Holt’s philosophy (and the title of his seminal 1981 book): *Teach Your Own*.<sup>18</sup>

Holt’s rough estimate of 10,000 held sway in the early 1980s. Then significant growth kicked in. By the 1990s state

**“Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.”**

– Albert Einstein

## How Many Homeschoolers are There?\*



\* Estimates from NCES (note: 1980 represents "guestimate" from John Holt)

education agencies (SEAs) recognized a steady increase in the number of homeschoolers and they began collecting data using estimates extrapolated from local district filing statistics. However, since there was no consistency in local filing requirements or the monitoring of homeschoolers, the states' data was unreliable. In fact, by the mid-90s only three states were believed to have filing rates that could be considered close to 100 percent accurate.<sup>19</sup>

Homeschooling is now legal in all 50 states and is not only growing but flourishing. Currently, the primary source used to calculate the number of homeschoolers in the U. S. is the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), part of the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), the independent, non-partisan arm of the U.S. Department of Education responsible for educational information, research, and statistics. Homeschooling statistics were first incorporated into NCES reporting in 1999 using data from the parent segment of the National Household Education Survey Program. That year NCES estimated that there were 850,000 homeschoolers, about 1.7 percent of the U.S. student population between the ages 5 to 17. By 2003, that number had increased to 1.1 million homeschoolers or 2.2 percent of all students. By 2007 it was 1.5 million or almost 3 percent of all students nationwide.<sup>20</sup>

The latest figures published by the NCES (2012) estimated 1.8 million, 3.4 percent of all K-12 students, were being home-educated in the U.S.<sup>21</sup> This is more than double the number that were being homeschooled when the NCES first began collecting data in 1999, reflecting an annual increase of 7 percent for most of the first decade. Meanwhile during that same time, public school enrollment was growing at less than 1 percent per year.<sup>22</sup>

While the remarkable homeschooler annual growth rate of 7 percent was not sustainable, the most recent estimate of 3 percent per year is still impressive.<sup>23</sup> Even this lower growth factor indicates that homeschooling easily surpassed the two million mark in 2016. Furthermore, even a slight increase in the 1.8 million homeschoolers in 2012 means that for the first time, those being homeschooled exceeded the 2016 parochial school enrollment.<sup>24</sup> With a continuing decline in private school enrollment<sup>25</sup> anticipated at least through 2026, homeschooling has become the country's fastest-growing alternative educational option.

As for Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) has published school and district profiles on their website covering over 30 years of data and has incorporated homeschooling numbers since 2010.

DESE currently states that there are some 7,500 homeschoolers in the state.<sup>26</sup> However, these counts are subject to the same vagaries as the national data estimates as they are self-reported

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by school districts. Ann Zeise, who has been writing and researching homeschooling issues for several decades estimates that there are over 28,000 homeschoolers in the Commonwealth.<sup>27</sup> In addition, a *Boston Magazine* article

essentially disputes the homeschooling count for the city of Boston as being under-reported by DESE by more than half.<sup>28</sup>

Ironically, as the question of *how many* homeschoolers was on the verge of being resolved, the definition of what *constitutes* a “homeschooler” began to unravel. Throughout the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the definition of a homeschooler seemed fairly straightforward: a student not enrolled in the public school system whose family conducted his or her educational process at home—or at least not in school.

### Who & Why

In the early days of contemporary homeschooling, homeschooling families were often stereotyped as either right-wing conservative Christians or left-wing progressive hippies. Later, sociologist Dr. Jane Van Galen coined the more charitable terms “ideologues” and “pedagogues” to describe homeschoolers based on their rationale for selecting home education and how it was implemented.<sup>29</sup>

Despite their disparate philosophies on how and why they homeschool, both camps have been united in their belief that parental choice in deciding to homeschool and the manner in which their children are educated is an intrinsic right, one which should not be usurped by the state. Both types of homeschoolers emphasize that enhancing “family relationships between children and parents and among siblings” is a prime motivation for their choice.<sup>30</sup> They also hold to the belief that the overall environment of traditional public school systems is not conducive to the educational goals they have for their offspring.

In general, ideologues tend to homeschool for religious or moral reasons, believing that the public schools either cannot fulfill these goals or that the public system undermines their family values via the curricula being taught. The content taught in public school science, literature, history, civics, and health classes often conflicts with a family’s beliefs. These families may purchase faith-based curriculum packages that reinforce their religious values.

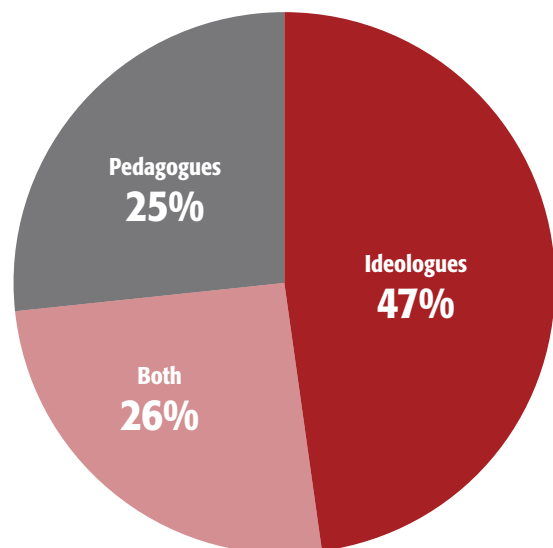
On the other hand, pedagogues tend to homeschool to be free from the constraints of a “one size fits all” system that doesn’t utilize a developmental, child-centered approach to learning. Like ideologues, they also tend to have concerns about curricula but they either purchase secular curricula or use alternative resources, modifying them as needed for each child.

While it has been generally assumed that fundamentalist Christians make up the majority of homeschoolers, the NCES does not specifically track those numbers. However some of the earliest NHES data from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century indicated that 70 percent of homeschoolers had a *non-religious* rationale as their prime reason to homeschool.<sup>31</sup> In addition, data from the 2012 report shows a significant change in the reasons families choose to homeschool compared to reasons that were paramount just five years earlier. Although in 2007, 36 percent of homeschoolers cited religious instruction as their prime motivation; five years later that percentage fell by more than half to 17 percent. “Environment in schools” had become the predominant reason for 25 percent of homeschoolers, and 91 percent listed it as one of the reasons that was important to them.<sup>32</sup>

In addition to these shifts in rationale, a survey by Hanna<sup>33</sup> found that 47 percent of the families identified themselves as ideologues, 25 percent as pedagogues, and a surprising 26 percent described themselves as both.

This blurring of the lines may also be confirmed by a sociological study that coined a new terminology: “first-choice” and “second-choice” homeschoolers.<sup>34</sup> The “first-choice” family is in essence the traditional homeschooling family, viewing homeschooling as a lifestyle and an integral part of a student’s growth.

Homeschoolers Based On Their Rationale\*



\* Based on survey by Linda G. Hanna



“Second-choice” homeschooling parents might be described as “pragmatic homeschoolers,”<sup>35</sup> perhaps even “reluctant homeschoolers.” While these parents exhibit the same devotion to finding what they consider the best educational options for their children and exercising their right to parental choice, the key distinction is that this sub-set tends to view homeschooling as a stop-gap solution to a school-based problem as opposed to an overall family lifestyle. Their reasons are usually the oft-cited dissatisfaction with the environment or instructional methods at local public or private schools. Their short-term goal is to homeschool until they can reach their ultimate goal: a better school situation for their child. This may mean eventually sending their child to a private school (which they may not be able to afford right now), moving to better school district, finding an ideal special needs school, avoiding a perceived situation (often at the middle school or high school level), re-entering the charter school lottery, etc. For the parent who shoulders the most responsibility for homeschooling, there are almost always competing personal, professional or financial goals (returning to the workforce, starting a new business, returning to school to get an advanced degree) that they are willing to sacrifice in the short term to support their child’s immediate and specific educational need.

At present there are no data identifying the number of these second-choice homeschoolers, but there are indications that lend support to the premise that this trend exists. Some 50 percent of homeschooling families do not homeschool all their children; half of all homeschooling families send at least one of their other children to a private, charter, or traditional public school.<sup>36</sup> While sending a child to a religious private school would be consistent with a family’s faith-based educational rationale, other homeschooling parents who opt for a traditional, charter, or *non*-religious private school for one or more of their children would seem to have a pragmatic reason for homeschooling that particular child.

Also supporting the evidence for the growth among second-choice homeschoolers is research that indicates that the average homeschooled child is educated at home for only two years. There is also approximately a one-third turnover of homeschoolers returning to school each year.<sup>37</sup> These statistics imply that a number of homeschooling families are struggling to find the best short-term educational option for an individual child even in the face of financial hardship rather than opting for the free educational programs offered by their

tax-supported local public school.

This significant one-third turnover rate also means that many more children than originally thought have experienced some homeschooling, since the overall numbers need to compensate for replacing students each year as they cycle in and out of the homeschooling process depending on the changing needs of the students and their families.

## Demographics

Although homeschooling families are far from homogeneous with regard to their approaches to education, some statistics do show similarities among homeschoolers. As 90 percent of them live in two-parent households (about 20 percentage points higher than all U.S. students) they are three times more likely to have only one of their two parents working<sup>38</sup>, which is not unreasonable considering one parent is usually handling the education process on a daily basis.

A recent survey by Education Next determined that 8 percent of the general public with school-aged children has participated in homeschooling. Furthermore, 7 percent of teachers with their own school-aged children have also homeschooled at some point.<sup>39</sup>

Homeschoolers tend to live in larger families. More than 60 percent come from homes with more than two children, compared to 40 percent for all U.S. students. They’re roughly evenly distributed among the nation’s regions, with the excep-

tion of more homeschoolers in the South than in the Northeast. Homeschoolers are somewhat more likely to reside in rural rather than suburban areas; the percentage of urban homeschoolers is similar to that of traditional students<sup>40</sup>. As mentioned earlier, roughly half of homeschooling households send one or more of their other children to a traditional school.

With regard to the educational background of homeschool parents and their children’s post K-12 education there is evidence showing a regression to the mean as the number of homeschoolers climbed to more than two million. In the past, when there were far fewer homeschoolers, articles often noted that virtually all available data showed homeschooled children testing above average on conventional measures of assessment, results similar to students attending private schools.<sup>41</sup> While there are still indications that SAT scores for homeschoolers are higher than the national average<sup>42</sup> and ACT scores for

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homeschoolers continue to exceed those of public school students, their scores now trail those of private school students.<sup>43</sup>

The educational level of homeschooling parents is also tending more to the national norm. Recent data indicate that the percent of homeschooling parents without high school diplomas has doubled since the early 2000s and the proportion who have graduate degrees has dropped by 25 percent.<sup>44</sup> This places the educational levels of homeschooling parents more on par with the general populace since nearly 90 percent of all Americans over age 25 have attained a high school diploma or GED.<sup>45</sup>

It has been estimated that 90 percent of K-12 students who are engaged in “time-intensive” activities (such as professional acting, dancing and modeling or Olympic and sports training) are homeschooled.<sup>46</sup> Another population with a higher percentage of homeschoolers relative to the general population are military families, who often are subject to deployments and relocations that result in disruptions to the continuity of their children’s education. The Military Child Education Coalition estimates that 9 percent of military families homeschool,<sup>47</sup> two to three times the rate of non-military families in the U.S.

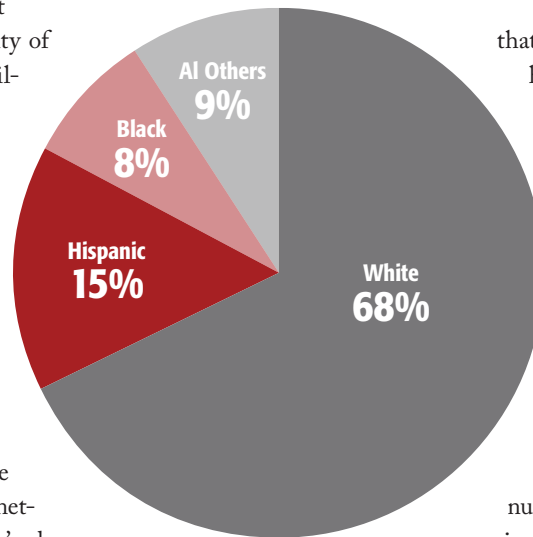
Of course the statistics relating to today’s young adults who were homeschooled reflect homeschooling as it occurred 15 to 20 years ago, prior to today’s ubiquitous use of the Internet for online learning and homeschool social networking and before homeschooling’s dramatic increase in this new century.

## Diversity

Some argue that choice, achievement, and diversity are at odds in a zero sum game. That is, more choice requires sacrificing achievement and/or diversity of thought, race and class. While choice in private and parochial education is often left out of the conversation since public funds are not being expended, it has been a prime consideration in the charter debate. This zero sum philosophy may explain the resistance of traditional public school advocates to the expansion of choice in the charter arena where there have been consistent attempts to counter the argument that charters tend to improve achievement. As

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– The NCES statistics for 2012



more evidence of charters’ success has emerged, the argument transitioned to a lack of diversity in charter schools and failure to advance the achievement of every student regardless of race or class. As charters have evolved and matured, they have worked to resolve those issues.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps the same can be said of homeschooling.

Though alternative schools have been castigated for lack of diversity compared to traditional public schools, homeschooling has actually been rapidly closing some of these diversity gaps. In the early days of contemporary homeschooling the

perception was that it consisted primarily of white, educated, and wealthy families. Various studies in last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century pegged the white percentage of homeschoolers at 96 percent, 93 percent and 98 percent.<sup>49</sup>

The extraordinary growth of homeschooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has resulted in numbers that are much more reflective of the country’s overall demographics. The NCES statistics for 2012 show that whites are down to 68 percent of the homeschooling population, while Hispanics now account for 15 percent (up from just over 5 percent in 2003). At 8 percent, the portion of homeschoolers who are black has doubled in the 2007 – 2011 timeframe<sup>50</sup> and seems to be growing rapidly, though still short of the 15 percent black students in the general populace.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the large increases in black and Hispanic homeschoolers, there are data indicating an increasing number of Jewish and Muslim homeschoolers in the past 15 years.<sup>52</sup> Native Americans and

Hawaiian natives are two emerging groups of homeschoolers who want an education for their children that supports and maintains traditional tribal values not included in public school settings.<sup>53</sup>

While charter schools are often criticized because between 8 and 10 percent of their population consists of students with disabilities, as opposed to the 13.1 percent served by traditional public schools,<sup>54</sup> the NCES indicates that 16 percent of homeschoolers list “child has a physical or mental health problem” as a reason they homeschool and over 15 percent specify “child has other special needs”.<sup>55</sup> While homeschooling a special needs child is not an easy task, homeschooling parents with special needs children have opted for a home environment where their child can learn at their own pace, utilize

materials that are appropriate to their learning style, and avoid bullying or ridicule that may occur at school.<sup>56</sup>

It has often been argued that traditional public school systems prepare students to be good citizens and function effectively in society by providing various points of view and exposing students to a diversity of ideas. The implication is that the “isolation” and parental influence of the homeschooling environment would skew the tolerance level of homeschooling students to the detriment of society. Yet a recent study has shown just the opposite, that homeschoolers exhibit more political tolerance than their public school peers.<sup>57</sup>

In addition, the National Education Association (NEA) has been highly critical of homeschooling over the years, routinely stating that “homeschooling programs based on parental choice cannot provide the student with a comprehensive education experience,”<sup>58</sup> despite a lack of evidence to support their position. The NEA then adds a number of strongly worded statements, insisting that parents should be licensed, curriculum should be approved, all costs should be borne by the parent, and homeschooled students should not be permitted to participate in any extra-curricular activities within the public school system.<sup>59</sup>

It is notable that the NEA describes its mission as “advocating for educational professionals”.<sup>60</sup> It is significant that its primary goal is not determining the best educational match for each child. As a union, it represents its dues-paying members rather than children seeking an education in a traditional public school. This means any alternative educational option that threatens its fundamental purpose of job protection can elicit a negative reaction, which reinforces that it is the responsibility parents to determine the best educational choice for their children.

While homeschooling may not be the best educational option for most families, the assumption that public school is the best option for all students may be equally flawed.

In summary, as the Center for Public Education (CPE) states, “It may be one of the least controversial statements in American education: parent involvement can make a difference in a child’s education.”<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the Center for Family, School and Community Engagement notes, “Almost everyone agrees that parents are, after all, their children’s first and most important teachers.”<sup>62</sup>

**The implication is that the “isolation” and parental influence of the homeschooling environment would skew the tolerance level of homeschooling students to the detriment of society. Yet a recent study has shown just the opposite, that homeschoolers exhibit more political tolerance than their public school peers.<sup>57</sup>**

## The Hybridization Of Homeschooling

Although homeschool cooperatives and the use of online courses have long been a staple of many homeschooling programs, the vast array of new educational options appearing or emerging during the past decade such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), blended learning, looping (continuing for more than one year with the same teacher)<sup>63</sup> and dual-enrollment have expanded homeschoolers’ curricular options and clouded the definition of who is a homeschooler.

In the past, many homeschooling families have purchased the materials and services of “umbrella schools” to assist with curriculum, testing, monitoring of attendance, and record keeping. They have also availed themselves of public charter schools, such as those in California and Alaska, which allow enrollment of homeschool students. A more recent trend is the use of homeschooling learning centers that provide part-time or full-time classes as needed. While these learning centers are somewhat similar to small private schools, Massachusetts learning centers are not accredited. Thus homeschooling parents still need to comply with the homeschooling approval process since they are ultimately responsible for the education of their child who is utilizing the learning center.

Within the homeschooling community, the increased number of homeschoolers resulted in a proliferation of co-ops as there were more homeschoolers condensed in localized areas. State support groups spawned regional and district support groups which, with these larger local populations, were able to provide more supplemental services such as field trips, classes, arts & crafts sessions, etc.

Some parents contend they are homeschooling when they enroll their children in an online virtual public school. Other parents may claim they are homeschooling both their pre-K children along with other school-aged offspring. The NCES considers one a homeschooler if their primary place of schooling is at home rather than at a public or private school *and* that their enrollment in a public/private school is not more than 25 hours per week.

Most researchers tend to look for a monolithic definition of homeschooling. However longtime education reformers and choice advocates John Chubb and Terry Moe define homeschooling’s future as a paradox when they state that “with the advance of technology, homeschooling is destined to increase—

and decrease”.<sup>64</sup> They define “home” as anywhere *but* the school building and predict that this distributed model of education will become dramatically popular as distance learning takes hold. Furthermore, many homeschoolers will actually be “going to school” by taking the same virtual courses as schooled students and the boundaries between home and school will break down and eventually cease to exist.

Thus, while the NCES definition of homeschooling is useful in estimating the number of homeschooled students, the current operational definition is a moving target, constantly evolving as the lines between school and homeschool blur.

## The Cost of Homeschooling

Families incur a cost when they decide to homeschool. Some of these costs are analogous to those borne by schools, such as books, technology, and supplies. These material costs can run from as little as a few hundred dollars to thousands depending on the individual family. On the low end, extensive library usage, used books, free online classes, and self-developed curricula can be utilized. Two significant traits of homeschooling families are their utilization of libraries in much greater proportion than the general populace<sup>65</sup> and their heavy reliance on the Internet to both access curricula and network with other homeschoolers<sup>66</sup>.

At the other extreme, the cost of goods and services such as packaged curricula, testing services, travel, museum memberships, external classes, and tutors can approach that of tuition and fees charged by private schools. Again, parental choice and individual family finances are the determining factors.

Unique to homeschooling, however, is that the biggest cost is usually the loss of one parent’s income since approximately 90 percent<sup>67</sup> of homeschooling families are two-parent households, and in more than half of these only one parent is in the workforce. This cost is significant because although homeschool households are less likely than public school families to be under the poverty level, they are more likely to be “near poor”<sup>68</sup> than either public or private school families. They are also less likely than either public or private school families to be in the federal “at or above” 200 percent poverty line, which would appear to be consistent with the loss of one parent’s income.<sup>69</sup>

An often overlooked but significant cost factor is savings to the American taxpayer. Just like private and parochial school students (but unlike charter school students), homeschoolers not only bear the brunt of their own educational costs but also

pay the same taxes to fund their district schools which they generally do not utilize to any large degree. Using the latest NCES figures reflecting the national average expenditure of \$11,011<sup>70</sup> per public school student, the two million homeschoolers essentially reduce public education costs by some \$22 billion per year.

## Federal Policy Impact

Under the current Republican administration, a revised focus on school vouchers and financial assistance for private and parochial schools may directly impact homeschooling. While federal dollars may or may not accompany this focus, states are rapidly advancing parental choice-based policies.<sup>70</sup>

Three prominent vehicles for achieving these goals are vouchers, tuition tax credits, and education savings accounts (ESAs). Vouchers permit families to utilize public education funds for alternatives to public school. Tax credits permit individuals and corporations to offset taxes by setting up scholarship programs for students to attend non-public schools. Education savings accounts, a more recent innovation, provide public funds that essentially entice existing public school students to

leave the public system and choose a private alternative. In the latter, the funds that are offered are less than the per-pupil cost of publicly educating the student and thus provide alternatives for families and financial savings for the district or state.

U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has stated, “Homeschooling represents another perfectly valid educational option. We’ve seen more and more people opt for homeschooling, including in urban areas. What you’re seeing are parents who are fed up with their lack of

power to do anything about where their kids are assigned to go to school. To the extent that homeschooling puts parents back in charge of their kids’ education, more power to them.”<sup>72</sup>

Recently, DeVos “lobbied for school-choice voucher programs and tax-credit initiatives, intended to widen the range of institutions—including private and religious—that could receive funding.”<sup>73</sup> Whether in states that consider homeschools to be private schools (or offer the option to operate as private schools) or those that treat students in private, parochial, or homeschools the same, such financial assistance would directly affect homeschoolers.

One of the new administration’s first attempts to legislate support for this educational philosophy was the January 23, 2017 filing of H.R.610, a bill which would distribute federal funds

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for elementary and secondary education in the form of vouchers for eligible students, including homeschoolers.

However, public financial support is a contentious issue within the homeschooling community. Many homeschoolers strongly believe that this type of support brings regulations, restrictions, and requirements that undermine the essence of homeschooling: parental choice of how, when and where to educate their children, and the freedom to match curricula and lessons to their children's individual learning styles. Negative reaction was quickly voiced by both the Christian-based Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) and the secular National Home Education Legal Defense (NHELD).<sup>74</sup>

While it would seem that many in the mainstream homeschooling community would resist federal dollars (and the strings attached), certain segments might be amenable to accepting the trade-off. "Second choice" homeschoolers who homeschool either until other opportunities arise or as a last

**Many homeschoolers strongly believe that governmental support brings regulations, restrictions, and requirements that undermine the essence of homeschooling: parental choice of how, when and where to educate their children, and the freedom to match curricula and lessons to their children's individual learning styles.**

resort, those new to homeschooling or who are considering homeschooling but are constrained by financial issues, or those who haven't considered homeschooling in the past but would be enticed by the concept combined with a financial offset all may be potential candidates for vouchers and educational savings accounts. In addition, those who

have opted for homeschool-like alternatives (such as being an enrolled public school student in a virtual school environment) may be induced to leave the public system. Prior homeschoolers who may have reluctantly returned to the public school for financial reasons also may be interested in homeschooling again if there is some cost compensation.

At the beginning of this article, the issue of defining and counting homeschoolers was discussed. If new federal policies offer parents financial incentives to homeschool, it will blur the line between family financed and publicly supported education, making it even more difficult for researchers to answer the "who" and "how many" questions as they look to provide data on the current state of homeschooling in the United States.

## Summary/Conclusions

Attempting to define and count homeschoolers is nearly an impossible task, one which will become only more difficult as educational hybrids continue to emerge and homeschooling families, unfettered by conventional norms, continue to be an incubator for educational innovations. Rather than marginalize homeschoolers, the traditional education community should grant them a seat at the education reform table. As learning, rather than schooling, becomes more the norm there may be much that traditional schools can learn from homeschoolers.

Some characteristics that are inherent in homeschooling, such as parental involvement, flexible scheduling, individualized learning plans, and looping have long been essential elements in homeschooling families. Homeschoolers have essentially paved the way in self-directed learning,<sup>75</sup> multi-age grouping, project-based learning, adapting to individual learning styles, and content mastery vs. seat-time. They continue to expand their use of alternative assessments, anywhere-anytime learning, and the use of apprenticeships.

Homeschoolers will continue to sample educational hybrids, "mix and match" classes, utilize internships and volunteer opportunities during their normal school day, experiment with virtual learning, increasingly incorporate dual-enrollment and early college into their plans, and continue with the flexibility to switch curricula at any time if it is not meeting their children's needs. It is not unreasonable that these pedagogical innovations currently used by homeschoolers will have the potential to be scaled up and utilized by traditional schools and education reformers.

Many progressive educators and teacher unions have been adamant that teacher certification (an input) should be a requirement for educating K-12 students. On the other hand conservatives, who often accept non-traditional teacher qualifications, stress accountability (an output). Homeschoolers have disproven the need for certification while often using alternative assessments to show evidence of accountability.

Despite the fact that homeschooling research and statistics often have been questioned because of small sample sizes and self-reporting, this may be less important than the lack of available studies showing that homeschooling has any significant *negative* effects on

**It is not unreasonable that pedagogical innovations currently used by homeschoolers will have the potential to be scaled up and utilized by traditional schools and education reformers.**

students.<sup>76</sup> As homeschooling has become more mainstream over the last 30 years, many of the general public’s earlier concerns have been alleviated.

The demand for homeschooling and the educational outcomes it has produced have been firmly established. It is time for states, districts, and individual teachers to begin accepting homeschooling as a viable educational

alternative. By becoming more knowledgeable about the practices and benefits of homeschooling traditional educators can begin to offer parents information, support, and encouragement, treating them as educational colleagues who care deeply about children’s learning.

**As there have been no studies showing homeschooling has negative effects on children and many positive outcomes have been identified, homeschooling should also be evaluated on ancillary benefits such as satisfaction with the choice itself, the role of family values and the overall pursuit of happiness that engendered by the process.**

### Inherent in the Definition of Homeschooling

Parental Involvement

Looping

Low Pupil/Teacher Ratio

Flexible Schedules

Individual Education Plans

### Solid Educational Practices that Have Been Long-Used in the Homeschooling Community

Multi-Age Grouping

Content Mastery vs Seat Time

Project-Based Learning

Apprenticeships

Self-Directed Learning

Adaptation to Individual Learning Styles

Alternative Assessment

Anywhere-Anytime Learning

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1 Acknowledge homeschooling as a viable educational choice.

Since all states permit homeschooling, districts and states should do more to acknowledge the viability of this educational alternative and provide direction and information for parents who may be seeking non-traditional options. Lending unbiased recognition would increase parental choice and potentially save financial resources for publicly funded schools.

Also, in light of the homeschooling growth and success over the past decades, the NEA needs to alter its self-serving declaration that only certified teachers are capable of educating the youth of the country. Parents have shown that they are not only more than capable of doing so, but that they should have the choice to determine who should be responsible for their children's learning environment.

### 2 Provide information on homeschooling to districts, superintendents and parents.

To make an informed choice about educational options for their children, parents need to be aware of the available possibilities. While the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) lists and links to all private and parochial schools in the commonwealth,<sup>77</sup> its website provides no equivalent links to statewide homeschooling organizations that can provide direction and advice to those who may be interested in pursuing the homeschool option. Making pertinent information easily available would be valuable for families to assist them in their educational decisions.

As there have been no studies showing homeschooling has negative effects on children, and many positive outcomes have been identified, homeschooling should also be evaluated on ancillary benefits such as satisfaction with the choice itself, the role of family values, and the overall pursuit of happiness that engendered by the process.

### 3 Allow homeschoolers access to extracurricular activities.

As school superintendents are responsible for *all* students of compulsory attendance age in their districts, granting access to extracurricular activities for homeschoolers wishing to take advantage of them would be beneficial to both homeschoolers and the community. Homeschooling families are taxpayers who have also chosen to incur additional educational expenses, arguably reducing some of the financial burden on the public school system. Permitting access to extracurricular school activities can help reduce some homeschooling obstacles, increase socialization opportunities, and integrate different educational perspectives.

### 4 Understand the need for alternative assessments in evaluating homeschoolers.

Just as “one size fits all” does not work on a curricular level, it cannot work for assessments. Permitting parents to choose the manner in which to instruct their children must also include the choice of assessment. While it may make sense to impose standardized assessments on public schools in which all students are learning the same things at the same grade level, these types of assessments do not translate well to a homeschool environment where the output, mastery of subject matter, is deemed more important than letter grades, seat time and time on task.

### 5 Include homeschooling input in education reform discussions.

Homeschooling is a lifestyle, but not one of isolation from the outside world. Ironically, homeschoolers tend to be more like the “real world” in that they integrate children's lives with people of all ages rather than just their same age peers. Thus, as homeschooling has attained a critical mass,

it is time for homeschoolers to take a seat at the education reform table. Having been an effective incubator of educational ideas and initiatives over the years, homeschoolers can continue to be the breeding ground for new experiences and methods.

While its proliferation has made it more acceptable now than in its early years, homeschooling is still faced with traditional education experts trying to apply traditional concepts of time and place. The homeschooling emphasis on depth and mastery is based on an individualized curriculum rather than on classroom coverage of district approved textbooks. Since individualization is not easily scalable there is a tendency to dismiss the value it could provide to traditional schools. This may very well be short sighted.

**6 Use caution about including homeschoolers in voucher initiatives or legislation.**

As counterintuitive as it may seem, many existing homeschoolers are not in favor of being included in any voucher initiatives that would provide monetary assistance for their educational expenses. The general rationale is that subsidies inevitably come with strings attached and that any potential to lose the freedom to choose the best curricula match for their individual children, how to implement and change it as need be, and determine the appropriate assessment is not worth the trade-off. However, a number of homeschoolers (and potential homeschoolers) may very well be attracted to financial assistance. Any legislation must be cognizant of this diversity of opinion and ensure that in the spirit of choice there would be an opt-out provision.



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## About the Authors

**William Heuer** and his wife Loretta homeschooled their two sons from birth through high school. He has been a presenter and panel participant at statewide and national homeschooling conferences and has given numerous media interviews about homeschooling. He is on the Board of Directors of the Massachusetts Home Learning Association (MHLA), the Commonwealth's oldest statewide homeschooling advocacy organization.

**William Donovan** is a former staff writer with the *Providence Journal* in Rhode Island where he wrote about business and government. He has taught business journalism in the graduate programs at Boston University and Northeastern University. He received his undergraduate degree from Boston College and his master's degree in journalism from American University in Washington, D.C.

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