

NEPC REVIEW: HOMESCHOOLING AND EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM: WHY SCHOOL CHOICE IS GOOD FOR HOMESCHOOLERS (CATO INSTITUTE, SEPTEMBER 2019)



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November 2019

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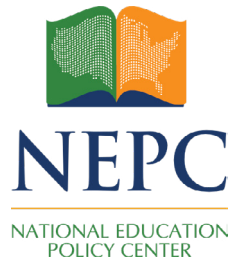
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Executive Summary

Homeschooling and Educational Freedom, a recent report from the Cato Institute, argues that homeschoolers should support school choice proposals because greater educational freedom empowers parents to provide richer learning opportunities for their children. Drawing on four states with expansive education choice programs, the report's rationale is grounded on a purported chain of causation from robust school choice policies to homeschooling growth to educational innovation. These causal contentions are purely speculative and are not borne out by the broader state-level data. In fact, at least half of all states lack reliable data. Among states with data, some that do show dramatic homeschooling growth have regulatory environments more favorable to school choice, but enough counterexamples exist to make even simple conclusions uncertain. While these problems compromise the usefulness of this new report, nothing here should be read to question the report's contention that homeschooling is a context in which educational innovation can indeed flourish. Such innovations are not the sole province of homeschoolers, since we find compelling examples in all sectors of schooling. But the flexibility of homeschooling provides ample room for learning experiences that can meet the needs of individual students. With modest state oversight to protect children's basic educational interests while preserving freedom for parents and their delegates to tailor the learning experience, homeschooling serves as one potentially effective option for a good education.



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I. Introduction

Homeschooling in the United States grew dramatically during the 1990s and early 2000s, and the most recent federal analysis estimates the total number of homeschoolers to be 1.8 million, which is 3.4% of the school-age population.¹ As part of the growing array of school choice options, homeschooling represents perhaps the ultimate form of educational privatization, where parents have the discretion to shape the education of their children with little or no state oversight.²

In her Cato Institute briefing paper entitled *Homeschooling and Educational Freedom: Why School Choice is Good for Homeschoolers*,³ Kerry McDonald explores possible connections between expanded school choice options in four states and the growth of homeschooling in those states. The eight-page report begins with a brief overview of the rise of homeschooling since the 1970s and then summarizes data from the most recent National Household Education Survey, conducted in 2016. The report observes a significant shift in the demographics and motivations of homeschool parents, away from the stereotype of white, middle-class, stay-at-home mothers motivated primarily by conservative Christian beliefs. While acknowledging that this demographic combination remains a significant subset, the report contends that homeschooling motivated by dissatisfaction with conventional school environments is now an important determinant in homeschooling.

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

This report argues that homeschoolers should support broader school choice proposals because greater educational freedom empowers parents to provide richer learning opportuni-

ties for their children. Drawing on the examples of four states with “robust private education choice programs” (p. 5)—Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin—the report suggests a causal link between greater private education choice and continued homeschooling growth and innovation. “Some homeschooling families may be taking advantage of school choice mechanisms, like education savings accounts (ESAs) and tax-credit scholarship,” the report states. “Even if they are not, an environment that supports educational freedom may encourage homeschooling growth” (p. 1).

III. Report’s Rationale for Findings and Conclusions

Each of the four states identified as having “flourishing education choice programs” (p. 6) experienced higher homeschool population percentage growth than public school enrollment percentage growth. The report contrasts this dynamic with national-level data, where homeschooling has declined while K-12 public school enrollment (includes charter schools) has grown. The report speculates that ESAs, tax credits, and private-choice friendly environments encourage homeschooling growth and community resources to support homeschoolers.

New Hampshire’s tax-credit scholarship program is also identified as a possible spur to the growth of homeschool resource centers, although New Hampshire is not included as one of the states whose homeschool enrollment is outpacing public school enrollment. (During the three-year period the report examines, their official homeschool numbers have actually declined from 5,914 to 2,875, but the state notes that “due to reporting changes, the data in this report should not be compared to prior years for trend data.”⁴)

The report contends that “by shifting power to families, education choice creates greater variety in how young people learn and triggers education entrepreneurship and experimentation” (p. 7). In support of the contention, the report describes two private schools in Tennessee and “a publicly funded, privately operated hybrid K-12 charter school network” in California which homeschoolers can attend part-time as part of their overall educational experience. It also mentions a learning center for homeschoolers in New Hampshire.

IV. Report’s Use of Research Literature

In describing the evolution of homeschooler demographics and motivations, the report draws primarily from data collected from the National Household Education Survey (NHES). While its recent shift in survey methodology from phone calls to postal mailings creates uncertainties about comparisons with previous survey years, it remains the best source for a national picture of homeschooling demographics, as most other research employs small-scale and/or convenience samples.

Despite minimal citation of scholarly literature (11 sources are cited beyond government sta-

tistics, including two books from academic presses and one peer-reviewed journal article), the presentation of current homeschooling practices and motivations doesn't differ significantly from that literature.⁵

The report's characterization of changing homeschooler demographics is generally accurate, although perhaps a bit overstated. While the demographics of homeschool families appears to be broadening, and the reasons for choosing homeschooling appear to be tilting more toward concern about school environment, more than half of homeschool parents still identify "a desire to provide religious instruction" as one of their motivations.⁶

When drawing conclusions about the growth of certain demographic subgroups such as race or ethnicity, we should bear in mind that the number of NHES respondents is quite small (e.g., 44 African Americans out of 552 total homeschoolers surveyed in 2016) and thus more subject to dramatic proportional fluctuation across survey years. For African Americans, this might help explain the drop from 9% of homeschoolers in 2003 to 4% in 2007 and then doubling back to 8% in 2012. Similarly, the percentage of homeschoolers identifying as Hispanic jumped from 15% in 2012 to 26% in 2016—signaling either a noteworthy shift or a temporary aberration in the survey data.⁷

Regarding the apparent disparity between a national homeschooling enrollment drop and increased homeschool numbers in state records, it's worth noting that more than half of states have not reported (or often even collected) homeschool numbers on a consistent basis. Even states that ostensibly require enrollment/registration do not have a reliable way to confirm that all homeschoolers have complied.⁸

V. Review of Report's Methods

Although Figure 3 shows an overall decline, the report bases its linkage of pro-private-school choice policies with homeschooling growth on the observation that "certain states with robust private education choice programs . . . are seeing particularly high growth in homeschooling compared with overall public school enrollment." In each of the four selected states analyzed in the report, homeschooling grew at a faster percentage rate than public school enrollment. After acknowledging that "many factors could be contributing to homeschooling expansion or decline in a given state" (p. 4), the report contends that choice programs such as Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) may provide parents with the additional resources necessary for them to pursue homeschooling. In addition, the report surmises, such discretionary funding could be incentivizing the creation of more resource centers for homeschoolers. And finally, even in states such as Wisconsin and Ohio, where ESAs and other funds for homeschooling are not available, the pro-choice climate fostered by a robust voucher program may be encouraging more families to choose alternative educational paths for their children, which in turn also generates more demand—and provision—of homeschool resources within local communities.

Not all high-growth homeschooling states have robust choice programs, however. Nor do all states with strong school choice funding have high homeschooling growth. Of the 20

states with enrollment data available across the three-year span examined by this report, six states experienced double-digit percentage growth in homeschooling; of those six, only one was ranked in the top 10 for spending on school choice programs (Louisiana, ninth highest spending).⁹ And while it's true that Louisiana is one of three states that allows homeschoolers to take a credit on their income taxes, evidence of significant homeschooler growth in the other two states is lacking (Illinois doesn't track homeschool numbers, and Minnesota saw 5% homeschooler growth—adding 903 more homeschoolers, versus about 19,000 more public school students, during that span).

Even when returning to just the four states analyzed in the report, the findings seem much less significant when viewed as absolute numerical shifts rather than percentages. During that three-year period, the increase in total number of homeschoolers exceeded public school growth in those states by roughly 25,000 students, out of more than 7 million school-aged children. In summary, the report's methodology is essentially speculative and anecdotal in nature: selecting four pro-school-choice states where homeschooling has grown faster than public school enrollment, and then mentioning four school/centers for homeschoolers as evidence of innovation.

VI. Review of the Validity of Findings and Conclusions

This report asserts a chain of causation from robust school choice policies to homeschooling growth to educational innovation. Although some states with dramatic homeschooling growth also have regulatory environments favorable to school choice more broadly, enough counterexamples exist, along with a pronounced lack of reliable data from at least half of all states, to make even simple correlation uncertain.

Educational options for homeschoolers have indeed proliferated as their numbers have grown, and many of these—such as umbrella academies, private learning centers, and family-run learning cooperatives—enable students to customize their educational experiences in a variety of creative ways. If this is what the report means by “a key trend” (p. 3), then plenty of anecdotal evidence supports this limited claim. But such innovation is hardly unique to homeschooling. Likewise, homeschool practices can be just as rote and unimaginative as those found in conventional schools. The assertion that “homeschooling is driving innovation” overlooks the wide array of innovative forms and practices underway across institutional schooling—public schools and private schools, as well as the fastest growing educational segment, publicly supported magnet and charter schools.¹⁰

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Homeschooling and Educational Freedom avoids taking a position on whether homeschooling should be explicitly included in state policies and programs that support greater school

choice, acknowledging that some homeschool advocates oppose such policy inclusion due to fears of commensurately greater state regulation. (For example, homeschoolers in Indiana debate whether applying for the state tax deduction is worth the price of informing state authorities that they are homeschooling their children; currently the state does nothing with such data, but many families still prefer to remain anonymous). In addition, some research suggests that the expansion of school choice programs (public and private) might reduce homeschooling as parents access other funded alternatives.¹¹ While remaining agnostic about the value of extending school choice options and funding to include the practice of homeschooling, this report asserts that homeschoolers should support education choice programs regardless, “because more choice can lead to more homeschoolers overall” (p. 6). Creating more homeschoolers, however, isn’t necessarily a primary goal of current homeschoolers; certainly many of the homeschoolers I’ve interviewed over the past fifteen years would not want to see more parents homeschooling just for the sake of increased numbers, if those parents are not deeply committed to doing it well.

The new report draws attention to the curricular flexibility that homeschooling offers, and it emphasizes the ways that such flexibility appeals to many parents who desire a different sort of education for their children than conventional schooling typically provides. But the report’s unqualified advocacy of educational freedom elides important questions about the relative interests of parents, children, and the broader society which we share. Educational choice does not by itself ensure a good education; much depends on the wisdom of the choosers and the options available to them. This report endorses school choice because it “empowers parents to take control of their child’s education.” In its conclusion, however, the report endorses famed “unschooling” advocate John Holt’s view that “you cannot have human liberty . . . if you give to some people the right to tell other people what they must learn or know.” Presumably this would preclude parents from such domination as well.

A robust scholarly literature has engaged with the question of children’s own interests in their educational experience; a compelling argument exists that children’s future liberty depends on learning certain skills—basic literacy and numeracy, for example—regardless of their parents’ philosophies, capacities, or commitments.¹² A report asserting the inherent value of parental choice should at least consider the ways in which children have their own interests at stake, and that sometimes these might diverge from those of parents. Educational freedom can spur innovation but it can also enable neglect. From convenience samples, small-scale studies, and anecdotal reports, we know that many homeschoolers are flourishing academically—but such insight does nothing to confirm that the basic interests of all homeschooled children are being met.¹³ With modest state oversight to protect children’s basic educational interests while preserving freedom for parents and their delegates to tailor the learning experience, homeschooling can serve as one context for educational innovation.

Overall, while the report identifies some ways that homeschooling can contribute to educational innovation, it lacks usefulness as an argument for establishing a definitive relationship between school choice policies and homeschooling growth.

Notes and References

- 1 Wang, K., Rathbun, A., & Musu, L. (2019). *School choice in the United States: 2019* (NCES 2019-106). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019106.pdf>
- 2 Regulations vary widely; while some states mandate curriculum review, periodic testing, and/or portfolio review, half of states require no assessment or evaluation, and 11 of those don't even require homeschoolers to notify officials that they are homeschooling their children.
- 3 McDonald, K. (2019, September). *Homeschooling and educational freedom: Why school choice is good for homeschoolers*. Washington, DC: Cato Institute. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/bp_124.pdf
- 4 New Hampshire Department of Education. (2019). *Home schooled counts by district 2017 – 2018*. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from <https://www.education.nh.gov/data/documents/home-school17-18.pdf>
- 5 See, for example: Murphy, J., Gaither, M., & Gleim, C.E. (2017). The calculus of departure: Parent motivations for homeschooling. In M. Gaither (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of home education* (86-120). Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
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- 7 Planty, M., Hussar, W., Snyder, T., Kena, G., KewalRamani, A., Kemp, J., Bianco, K., & Dinkes, R. (2009). *The Condition of Education 2009* (NCES 2009-081). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009081_1.pdf;
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- 8 For example, in talking with families in Oregon for my book *Write these laws on your children: Inside the world of conservative Christian homeschooling* (Beacon, 2009), I learned that the state has no means to track them if their children never attended public schools, so they never felt compelled to “register.”
- 9 Catt, D. (2018). *The states ranked by spending on school choice programs, 2018 edition*. Indianapolis, IN: EdChoice. Retrieved October 15, 2019, from <https://www.edchoice.org/blog/the-states-ranked-by-spending-on-school-choice-programs-2018-edition/>
- 10 To match the four homeschool-related examples from the report, consider the following four innovative non-homeschools: Big Picture Learning (<https://education-reimagined.org/map/big-picture-learning/>); Souhegan High School (<https://www.sau39.org/domain/178>); Jefferson County Open School (https://jcos.jefcopublicschools.org/about_us/history); and Harvest Collegiate High School (<http://harvestcollegiate.org/>).
- 11 DeAngelis, C.A. & Dills, A.K. (2019). Is school choice a “Trojan Horse”? The effects of school choice laws on

homeschool prevalence. *Journal of School Choice*, 94(3), 342-354.

12 See, for example: Glanzer, P.L. (2008). Rethinking the boundaries and burdens of parental authority over education: A response to Rob Reich's case study of homeschooling. *Educational Theory*, 58(1), 1-16;

Reich, R. (2008). On regulating homeschooling: A reply to Glanzer. *Educational Theory*, 58(1), 17-23.

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