

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2254
January 28, 2009

Homeschooling Sees Dramatic Rise in Popularity

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In December, the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics released new estimates on the number of American families homeschooling their children. The new report shows the growing popularity of homeschooling. In view of this trend, it is important that federal and state policymakers safeguard families' right to educate their children at home.

Growing Homeschooling Movement. The report shows that approximately 1.5 million children (2.9 percent of school-age children) were being homeschooled in the spring of 2007, representing a 36 percent relative increase since 2003 and a 74 percent relative increase since 1999.¹ One private researcher estimates that as many as 2.5 million school-age children were educated at home during the 2007–2008 school year.²

The homeschooling survey also reveals the most common reasons cited by families as the basis for their decision to educate their children at home. The most frequently referenced reasons included the ability to provide moral or religious instruction (36 percent), concern about the environment at other schools (21 percent), and dissatisfaction with the academic instruction provided at other schools (17 percent).³ The number of parents reporting the ability to provide moral or religious instruction as a rationale for homeschooling their children increased by 11 percentage points (from 72 percent in 2003 to 83 percent in 2007).⁴

Additional reasons parents homeschooled their children included “other” reasons (14 percent),

desire for nontraditional education (7 percent), special needs (4 percent), and physical or mental health problems (2 percent).⁵ There was a 12 percentage point increase in the amount of respondents choosing “other” reasons, from 20 percent in 2003 to 32 percent in 2007. This increase could indicate an expansion in the types of demographic groups homeschooling their children.⁶

Benefits of Homeschooling. The available evidence suggests that homeschooling students perform as well as their non-homeschooled counterparts. In general, homeschooled students perform as well as—and in some cases outperform—their non-homeschooled peers.⁷

Homeschooled students succeed academically regardless of family income or teacher certification of parents.⁸ Top-tier colleges and universities also recognize the academic abilities of homeschooled students, with Stanford, Yale, and Harvard among the institutions with the most homeschool-friendly policies.⁹

An additional benefit of homeschooling comes in the form of savings to taxpayers and school systems. Analysts have estimated that homeschooled students save American taxpayers and public schools

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm2254.fgm

Produced by the Domestic Policy Studies Department

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
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between \$4.4 billion and \$9.9 billion annually.¹⁰ Other estimates are as high as \$16 billion.¹¹

Trends and Anticipated Growth. Homeschooling may be the fastest growing form of education in the U.S.,¹² rivaled only by charter schools.¹³ The 74 percent increase in homeschooling since 1999 alone suggests continued future growth. The homeschooling movement has also gained traction among minority students, which represent approximately 15 percent of homeschooling families.¹⁴

The continued growth in homeschooling is facilitated by organizations that assist families with needs ranging from curriculum and instruction to advancing legislation that ensures the freedom to educate children in the home. These burgeoning networks demonstrate that homeschooling is becoming an increasingly viable option for families.

Homeschooling continues to broaden and grow

because of the vast array of education options and flexibility it provides for families. This crucial component of education reform creates an additional alternative for parents and students. It is estimated that more than 1 million children attend charter schools or benefit from voucher programs in the United States—a figure on par with the more than 1.5 million estimated homeschooled students. Economists have found that the competitive effects of school choice programs have prompted improvement in public schools.¹⁵ While more research is needed, the homeschooling movement could be taking part in the same trend.

Protecting Homeschooling. Legal rights to homeschooling have been established nationwide, facilitating the growth of home-based instruction. Presently, homeschooling is legal in every state. Policymakers should protect parents' rights to homeschool their children and enact reforms that remove barriers to homeschooling. In order to provide

1. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "1.5 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2007," December 2008, at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009030.pdf> (January 6, 2009).
2. Brian D. Ray, "Research Facts on Homeschooling," National Home Education Research Institute, July 2, 2008, at <http://www.nheri.org/Research-Facts-on-Homeschooling.html> (January 6, 2009).
3. National Center for Education Statistics, "1.5 Million Homeschooled Students."
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. Janice Lloyd, "Home Schooling Grows," *USA Today*, January 6, 2009, at http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2009-01-04-homeschooling_N.htm (January 22, 2009).
7. A 1998 report by Lawrence Rudner of the University of Maryland found that homeschooled students performed well on tests of academic achievement, typically scoring in the 70th and 80th percentiles. Lawrence M. Rudner, "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 7, No. 8 (March 23, 1999), at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n8> (January 22, 2009). See Dan Lips and Evan Feinberg, "Homeschooling: A Growing Option in American Education," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2122, April 3, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2122.cfm>.
8. Ray, "Research Facts on Homeschooling."
9. Home School Legal Defense Association, "Home Schoolers in Ivy League Universities," May 3, 2000, at <http://www.hslda.org/docs/nche/000002/00000234.asp> (January 22, 2009).
10. Lips and Feinberg, "Homeschooling."
11. Ray, "Research Facts on Homeschooling."
12. *Ibid.*
13. Forty states and the District of Columbia saw the introduction of 355 new charter schools during the 2008–2009 school year. Center for Education Reform, "Charter School Facts," September 18, 2007, at <http://www.edreform.com/index.cfm?fuseAction=document&documentID=1964> (January 27, 2009).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Caroline Minter Hoxby, "Rising Tide," *Education Next*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Spring 2001), at www.educationnext.org/20014/68.html (November 2, 2007), quoted in Lips and Feinberg, "Homeschooling."

meaningful protections to homeschooling families, Members of Congress should avoid restrictive regulations at all levels of schooling and offer tax relief to homeschoolers through education tax credits or deductions. Homeschooling families provide a valuable contribution to American education, often while incurring a significant financial burden in addition to their taxes paid toward public education. Policies should recognize the educational contribution of homeschooling and ensure that the freedom to homeschool is permanently protected and fostered.

In view of all the benefits that homeschooling provides to homeschooled children as well as society as a whole, lawmakers should enact policies that give more families the opportunity to participate in homeschooling. Federal and state policymakers should work to guarantee that families have the freedom to educate their children at home in the future.

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