



Does Homeschooling Improve Educational Opportunities?

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Homeschooling is on the rise in the early twenty-first-century United States, as parents embrace this approach and advocacy organizations promote it as part of a larger “school choice” movement. Estimates suggest that there are currently 2.3 million American students that are homeschooled compared to 50.1 million students in public schools and 4.9 million in private schools.

Homeschooling rests on the foundational idea that parents, as children’s legal guardians, are the primary decision makers for their children until they become adults. Nevertheless, this understanding of parental sovereignty coexists in uneasy balance with the obligation by the wider public to ensure the general welfare and protection of all children. Policymakers and parents should thus consider the wider implications of this practice and examine the empirical evidence about the effects of homeschooling.

Homeschooling in the United States

Although newly on the rise, homeschooling is one of the oldest forms of education in the United States. Indeed, prior to the establishment of public schools, homeschooling or private tutoring that took place in the home represented a staple delivery system for the education of the nation’s youth. After seemingly being displaced by the rise of public and private shared schools, the practice has enjoyed a resurgence in recent decades as families withdraw from the public sphere because of concerns about the religious or political content of school curricula or worries about safety or the social or racial composition of available schools. A primary feature of homeschooling is that parents are able to select specific religious or other curriculum content for their children and tailor instruction to the needs of the individual student.

Powerful organizations are pushing for the growth and deregulation of homeschooling. Efforts such as the Home School Legal Defense Association, Exodus 2000, and the Christian Home Educators Association of California, to name a few, seek to make homeschooling easier, more accessible, and less accountable to state authority. Advocates argue that homeschooling reduces taxpayers’ obligations while at the same time producing better outcomes – a claim supposedly supported by the high academic performance reported for some homeschoolers.

Does Homeschooling Improve Education?

Advocates of homeschooling and the parents who engage in the practice of educating their children at home often claim that empirical evidence proves homeschooling “works,” results in greater effectiveness and efficiency because it offers a more specialized or appropriate education for the individual student. But claims that homeschooling improves educational outcomes are not supported by the evidence.

Advocates suggest that higher test scores and other academic outcomes such as college acceptance are evidence that homeschooling raises academic performance. But correlation does not indicate causation. Although it is true that students who are homeschooled often enjoy higher scores than their public school peers, such students also have socioeconomic backgrounds and family supports (such as involved parents) that researchers have found predict good academic outcomes for students in all types of schools or educational regimes. In short, homeschooled children who do well would usually have done equally well in public or private schools.

Homeschooling advocates also suggest that the practice of educating children at home costs less than educating students in public schools. In fact, homeschooling advocacy organizations claim that homeschooling costs as little as \$400 per year – compared to thousands of dollars per year spent by public schools. According to this line of thinking, homeschooling gets better results for less money.

Apart from the fact that, as noted above, research does not support the overall claim that homeschooled children have unusually high levels of achievement, advocates do not include the full costs associated with homeschooling – such as the cost of parents' foregoing salaries to stay at home to do instruction. Many homeschooling families also make use of local public facilities such as libraries or sports teams. And advocates fail to take into account the overrepresentation of high-cost students in public schools.

The Larger Impact

Students whose families can afford the increased cost of homeschooling would likely not only do just as well in public schools, their presence in public schools would benefit all students. These students tend to have attentive parents and strong support networks that would strengthen beneficial “peer effects” for all students in schools they attended.

In the final analysis, homeschooling represents a growing portion of the expanding “school choice” movement – a movement devoted to weakening and displacing public schools without necessarily considering the full range of evidence about the impact of different forms of schooling on all families and children.

Questionable claims about effectiveness and efficiency must be carefully evaluated with rigorous evidence, so that homeschool practices can be subjected to appropriate oversight and equal educational quality ensured for all students. To assess the boldest claims from school choice advocates, more work must also be done to understand the overall effects of existing school choice and homeschooling policies for local school districts and their students.

Newly proposed school choice policies should be examined cautiously by state and local policymakers, parents, teachers, and others concerned about the quality of education in affected places. To ensure that students get a quality education no matter where they live, education policy researchers must work closely with families, teachers, and local leaders and civic groups that care about furthering good quality, equal educational opportunities for all Americans no matter where they live.

Read more in T. Jameson Brewer and Christopher Lubienski, “Homeschooling in the United States: Examining the Rationales for Individualizing Education,” in *Pro-Posições*, 28, No. 2, (2017).