



CHARLY KURZ/REDUX (LEFT), MANDEL NGAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES (MIDDLE)

Homeschool Happens Everywhere

LESS FORMAL INSTRUCTION,
BUT MORE FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES



Homeschoolers in action at, from left, the White Plains Library in Westchester County, N.Y.; an extracurricular drumming class in Mount Rainier, Md., and a program that is a blend of homeschooling and traditional classroom instruction at Da Vinci Charter School in Hawthorne, Calif.

JEFF GRITCHEN/DIGITAL FIRST MEDIA/ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER VIA GETTY IMAGES

HOMESCHOOLED STUDENTS ARE ISOLATED

and at urgent risk of harm from maltreatment, under-education, and parental abuse. That's the case Harvard Law School professor Elizabeth Bartholet made in her recent call to ban the practice, which has been legal in all 50 U.S. states for more than a quarter-century. Ironically, Bartholet's article in the *Arizona Law Review* appeared just as millions of parents were forced to turn to homeschooling temporarily, under stay-at-home orders that closed schools across the country.

It can be difficult to know precisely what, when, and how the nation's homeschooled students are learning. After all, privacy and the freedom to explore education as families see fit, with limited government oversight, is a defining feature. But the best evidence we have indicates that homeschooled students are far from isolated.

By looking at a recent national survey of American households

conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, I found that homeschooled students are more likely to participate in cultural and family activities than their public-school peers. They seem to spend less time on formal instruction in humanities subjects, but more time visiting libraries and museums and attending community events. If public exposure protects children and cultural knowledge is a major goal for education, concerns that homeschooled students are in danger appear, at the very least, overblown.

Who Homeschools Their Children?

Homeschooling is both a growing and changing practice. The number of families reporting that they homeschool their children grew to 1.7 million by 2016, representing 3.3 percent of all U.S. students aged 5-17, according to the National Household Education Survey (see Figure 1). On that survey, a nationally

by DANIEL HAMLIN

representative sample of families also answered a range of questions about their demographics and levels of education. Responses were collected from 14,075 families in all, including 552 homeschool families across the United States.

Overall, homeschool parents are more likely to be white or Hispanic and are less likely to hold college degrees (see Figure 2). Some 55 percent of homeschool families are white compared to 49 percent of public-school families, and 29 percent of homeschool families are Hispanic compared to 22 percent in public schools. Homeschool families are also more likely to have three or more children than families in public or private schools. Some 32 percent of homeschool households include an adult with at least one college degree, compared to 36 percent of public-school families and 64 percent of families whose children attend private schools.

The 2016 National Household Education Survey also asked homeschool families questions about formal instruction and participation in enrichment activities, pointing to some of the ways in which the practice has evolved. Thanks to the Internet, homeschool families have more resources and share larger communities than in decades past. Online clearinghouses, blogs, and social-media groups for families who follow particular educational philosophies are readily available. Casual parent groups pool resources, formal homeschooling cooperatives bring students together for hands-on science experiments and dance classes, and homeschool sports leagues give students the opportunity to play on a team. On the survey, some 30 percent of homeschool families reported children received some instruction through a homeschool organization or cooperative.

In addition, with ever-expanding access to online content and educational technology, the term “hybrid homeschooling” has emerged to describe families who combine home education with part-time attendance at a virtual or brick-and-mortar school. According to the Education Commission of the States, 26 states allow homeschoolers to participate in enrichment activities at a local public school, and states like Vermont and Nevada have allowed homeschoolers to enroll in classes at public schools to augment their studies. And that doesn’t include the sorts of virtual learning programs that have become commonplace during the Covid-19 pandemic: live group enrichment classes like Outschool, online community-college courses, video teaching tools like Khan Academy, and individual tutoring via text and video chats.

A Cultural Concern

One worry about homeschooling rests on the idea of “cultural capital,” the valuable constellation of cultural knowledge, behaviors, tastes, and physical markers of status that help adults navigate their communities and boost their likelihood of success. When French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduced this idea in the late 1970s, he described cultural capital as a possession of the upper class, arguing that affluent individuals naturally transmit cultural capital to one another through rituals, practices, and values. Institutions, in theory, reward those who possess upper-class cultural capital, associating it with individual ability. Empirical research, however, suggests that cultural capital is not necessarily limited to the affluent.

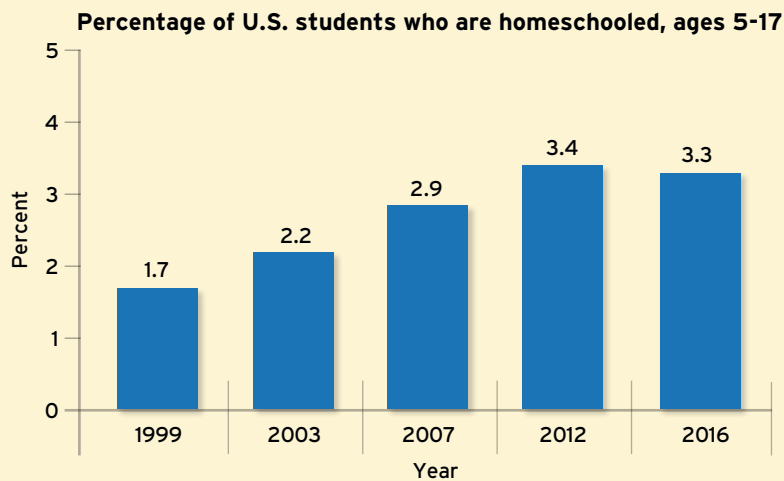
In thinking about how to measure this intangible force, scholars have looked at exposure to various activities that may enable the acquisition of cultural capital, such as visiting an art gallery or museum, experiencing a live artistic performance, and visiting a zoo, aquarium, athletic event, or historical site. In looking specifically at children, scholars have also considered activities like visiting a bookstore or library and shared reading, as well as parent-child interactions like discussing books, music, or art.

Many traditional school experiences may impart cultural capital, such as participation in music and art classes, involvement in student clubs, and study of foreign-language and classical literature. So the concern for homeschooled students is that they lack access to these experiences at home. Supplies found in art rooms, books available in school libraries, and instruments accessible in music class could be cost-prohibitive for individual families to offer. A sole parent-teacher could struggle to be a multi-subject content expert in these many arenas. The common trope of the poorly socialized homeschooled student who knows little about the outside world is rooted in these assumptions.

A Growing Share of Homeschooled Students

(Figure 1)

The percentage of U.S. students who are identified as homeschooled has doubled in the past two decades, reaching 3.3 percent in 2016.



SOURCE: National Household Education Surveys Program, National Center for Education Statistics

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However, what if this is not the case? The evolving nature of homeschooling could instead offer expanded opportunities for students to gain cultural capital. There appears to be a growing array of online education resources and part-time enrollment programs at postsecondary institutions. Homeschool days are common at child-friendly museums, as are references to homeschooling cooperatives. One-to-one instruction could progress at a faster pace than traditional group classes, freeing up more time for excursions and extracurricular activities (see “The Educational Value of Field Trips,” *research*, Winter 2014). The question is, how do homeschool families spend their time, and to what extent are they creating opportunities for students to obtain cultural capital?

The 2016 National Household Educational Survey offers a rich set of data to examine that question, though it has some limitations. First, the results are derived from self-reports, and respondents may overestimate their children’s participation in cultural and family activities. Given their unconventional decision to educate their children outside of formal education systems, homeschool families may be particularly susceptible to this social-desirability bias. Alternatively, their lack of regard for convention may make them worry less about what others think.

The activities covered by the survey also may not include the ways that families could provide different experiences for their children. For example, many if not most homeschool families are from conservative Christian households who report religious and moral instruction as key influences. This background may influence the types of cultural excursions they value.

Finally, the information the survey provides is relatively basic. For example, reports of formal instruction are based on a yes/no format and do not include the frequency or rigor of activities. Reports of family activities like arts and crafts or playing sports may simply capture the main activities of homeschooling rather than something above and beyond what students are doing for “school.”

What Homeschool Families Said

Families who reported educating their children at home were asked a range of questions about their homeschooling practices, including which adult primarily leads learning, how many days a week they homeschool,

which subjects are taught, and whether their child receives instruction from a cooperative or school. All surveyed families answered questions about cultural and family activities. I compared reported participation in those activities by homeschool families and by families whose children attend public and private schools.

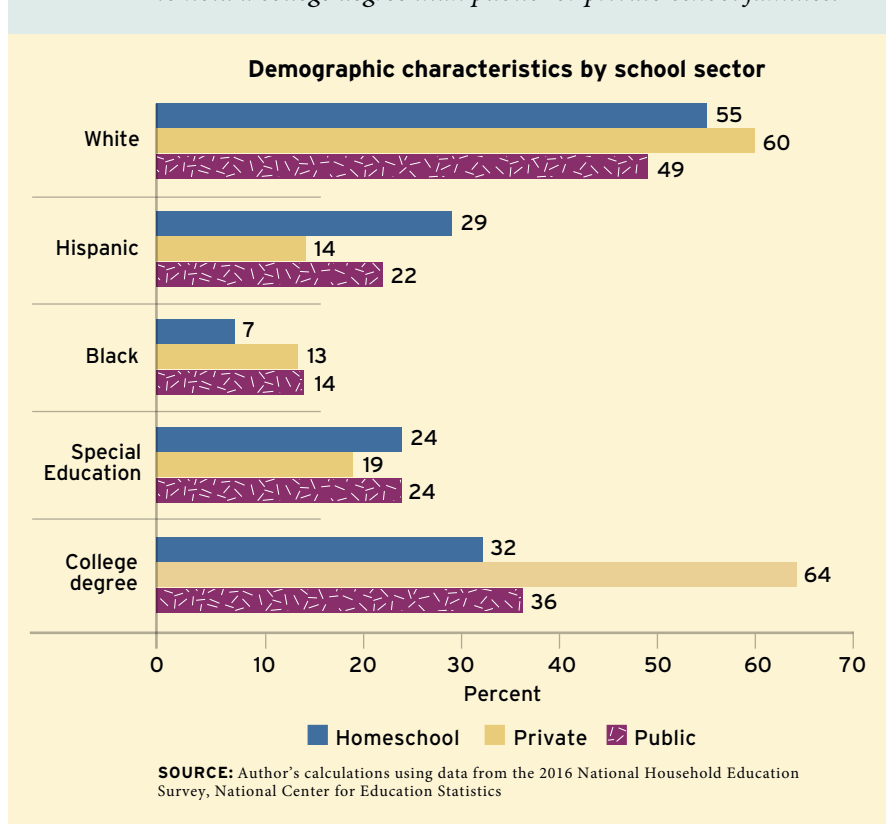
In terms of formal learning, 29 percent of homeschool families reported teaching all four main humanities subjects: art, music, foreign language, and literature. Another 29 percent reported teaching three of them, and 42 percent reported teaching two or less. This suggests that formal instructional opportunities for cultural-capital acquisition could be lacking for many homeschooled students. Even though only homeschool households report on the teaching of these subjects on the survey, other national data has indicated that students attending public schools tend to receive instruction in arts, music, literature, and foreign language at higher rates.

Homeschool organizations or cooperatives appear to increase

Characteristics of Homeschool Families

(Figure 2)

Homeschool families are more likely to be white or Hispanic, about as likely to have children with special needs, and less likely to hold a college degree than public- or private-school families.



Homeschool families have more resources and share larger communities than in decades past.

the breadth of content to which homeschooled children receive exposure. Nearly three-quarters of families whose children receive group instruction report formal study in at least three humanities subjects. By comparison, among families whose children do not participate in homeschool groups, approximately half report formal instruction in three to four of the humanities subjects.

However, my analysis shows that homeschooled students are more likely to engage in activities outside the home that can contribute to cultural capital (see Figure 3). In comparing survey responses for homeschool and public-school families, I find homeschool families are 17 percentage points more likely to visit an art gallery or museum, 22 percentage points more likely to visit a library, and 17 percentage points more likely to attend an event sponsored by a community, religious, or ethnic group. They are also 8 percentage points more likely to visit a

zoo or aquarium, and 7 percentage points more likely to visit a bookstore. These patterns seem to indicate that homeschooled students may gain exposure to cultural capital through excursions, alongside or in lieu of formal instruction.

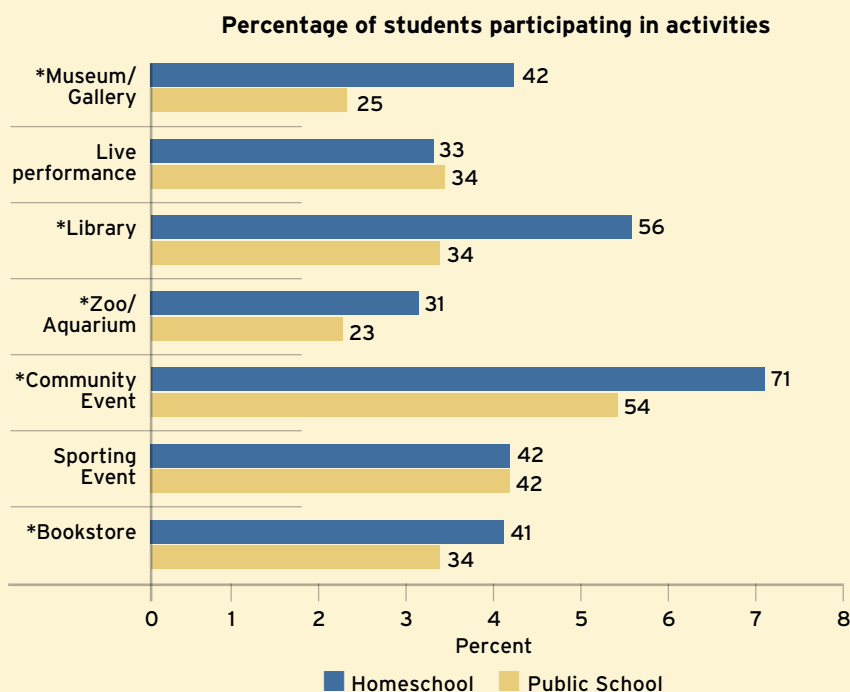
I then investigate the likelihood of homeschooled students participating in family activities that may be associated with cultural capital and find similar results (see Figure 4). Compared to their public-school peers, homeschooled students are 17 percentage points more likely to do arts and crafts and 13 percentage points more likely to work on projects that entail building, making, or fixing an object with family. In addition, homeschool households are 9 percentage points more likely more likely to report playing sports or doing physical activities together.

In general, families where at least one parent has a college degree report greater participation in most activities, particu-

larly culturally rich excursions like visiting museums and art galleries, going to bookstores and libraries, and attending live artistic performances. However, this well-documented association between parents' education level and cultural activities is less evident for homeschool households. Homeschool families are the least likely to report having a parent or guardian with a college degree but are the most likely to indicate participation in cultural and family activities. Interestingly, less-educated homeschool families report more cultural and family activities than public- or private-school families where at least one parent has a college degree.

Greater Participation in Cultural Activities for Homeschooled Students (Figure 3)

Homeschooled students are more likely to attend a community event or visit a museum than their counterparts in public schools.



NOTE: *indicates that the difference is statistically significant at the 95-percent confidence level.

SOURCE: Author's calculations using data from the 2016 National Household Education Survey, National Center for Education Statistics

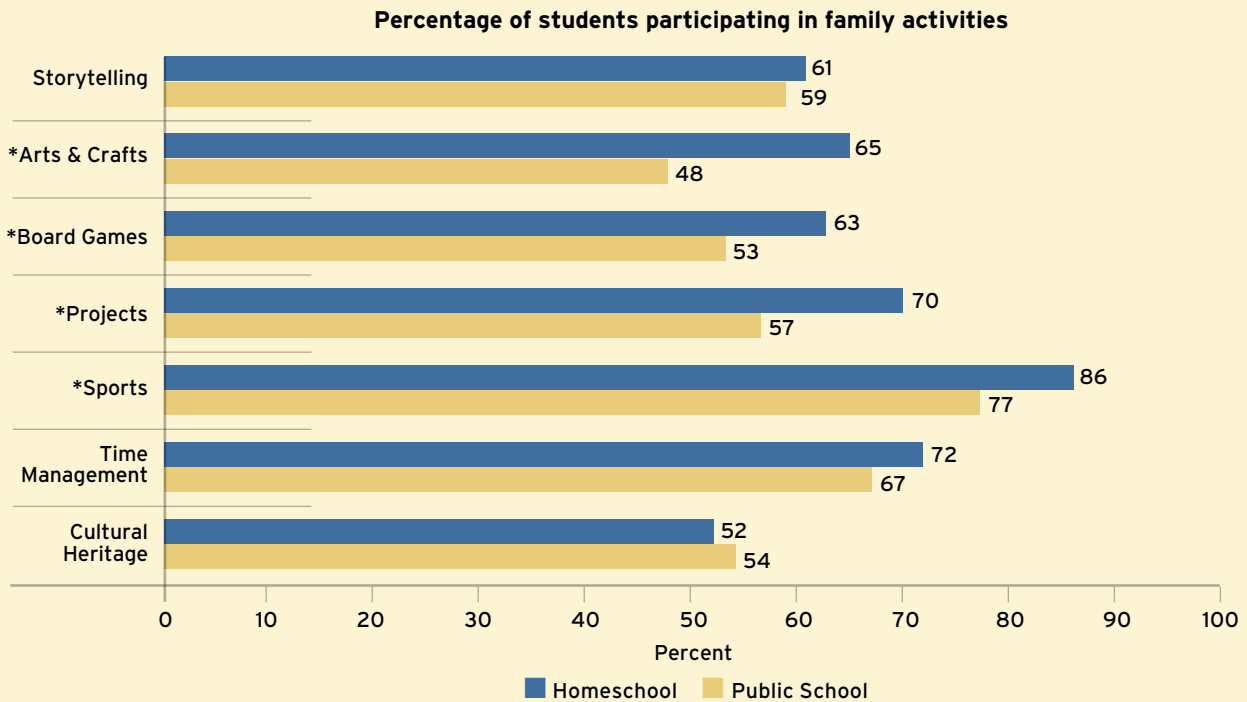
Looking Beyond Formal Instruction

While the practice of homeschooling seems to be undergoing a transformation, the debate and criticisms raised by Bartholet remain dominated by conventional assumptions and timeworn concerns. Worries about deprivation for homeschooled children do not appear substantiated by the survey findings I examine.

Homeschool families report higher rates of participation in cultural and family activities, suggesting that students have opportunities to acquire cultural capital outside of formal instructional time. Indeed, increased opportunities for hands-on learning may be a fundamental

More Family Activities for Homeschooled Students (Figure 4)

Homeschooled students are more likely to engage in family activities like arts and crafts, board games, and sports compared to students enrolled in public schools.



NOTE: * indicates that the difference is statistically significant at the 95-percent confidence level.

SOURCE: Author's calculations using data from the 2016 National Household Education Survey, National Center for Education Statistics

reason why some families opt to homeschool. Participation in these types of activities also may play a compensatory role, possibly offsetting what may be forfeited by not attending a traditional brick-and-mortar school. And it may offer a glimpse of the potential unique benefits to homeschooling, such as more frequent exposure to museums and art galleries and other community-based opportunities to engage with high culture.

This initial foray into the relationship between cultural capital and homeschooling underscores lines of inquiry for future research. Little is known about how homeschool parents attempt to teach art, music, and foreign languages. Furthermore, it remains uncertain whether a lack of instruction in humanities subjects among homeschool households signifies a rejection of conventional forms of instruction or is a consequence of unobserved barriers that these families face.

These findings cannot fully answer the concerns raised by Bartholet about child safety and homeschooling. Child neglect and abuse are urgent problems in some share of all families, and it is true that some children find refuge and access social-service supports through their schools. However, national survey data does not indicate that this is a concern for the majority. Critiques

that homeschooled children grow up in cultural and social isolation may be overstated and mischaracterize the practice.

A richer understanding of homeschooling is especially relevant as families across the United States contemplate an uncertain return to full-time formal instruction in school buildings in the fall of 2020. Taking the activities of homeschool families as a guide, reduced classroom time or continued closures may potentially free up more time for different sorts of educational activities that parents and children can pursue at home. Even if museums and libraries remain closed, they have created rich online tours and educational programs in the wake of the pandemic, like those offered by the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, the Louvre, NASA's Langley Research Center, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Is the knowledge students gain from these sorts of activities equivalent to what they develop through experiences at school? What might be the benefits, as well as the limitations, of exploring education in this way on a broad scale? In the pandemic age, we may be about to find out.

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