

## Measuring Up

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Considering homeschooling? Been homeschooling for a while and wondering about the effectiveness of homeschooling, or just curious? Now that the current homeschooling movement is more than several decades old, you may be wondering what kind of results homeschooling is producing. What kind of scientific evidence now exists that can be used to determine the quality of the efforts being made by parents across the country? Just what research is being done and what is that research saying? With the homeschooling movement continuing to grow and becoming increasingly diverse (McDowell, S.A. & Ray, B.D. (2000) "The Home Education Movement in Context, Practice and Theory: Editor's Introduction." *Peabody Journal of Education*. Vol. 75, Num. 1&2, 1-7. and Crowson, R. (2000) "The Home Schooling Movement: A Few Concluding Observations." *Peabody Journal of Education*. Vol. 75, Num. 1&2, 294-300) there is continued interest in the quality of the educational experience of homeschool students. Because of the length of time that families have been homeschooling, there has been opportunity to study how well homeschoolers do, particularly in comparison with public school students. Two areas in particular are of interest in these studies: the academic performance of homeschool students and their socialization. What is the research saying about these two topics?

### Academic Performance

Looking into the research on the issue of academic performance of homeschoolers, it quickly becomes apparent that an abundance of material is not readily available. (Reavis, R. & Zakriski (2005) "Experts Speak Out: Are Home Schooled Children Socially at Risk or Socially Protected?" *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*. Vol. 21, Num. 9. Hill, P.T. (2000) "Home Schooling and the Future of Public Education." *Peabody Journal of Education*, Vol. 75, Num. 1&2, 20-31) But if you are willing to dig and do a little reading of academic journals, you can find treasure. What you begin to see right away is an overwhelming amount of evidence that homeschool students do very well when compared to public and even private school students. (Rudner, L. M. (1999) "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998." *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. Vol. 7, Num. 8 <http://epaa.asu.edu/v7n8/>) Two major studies in particular rise to the top in terms of size and their general recognition in the literature. The first study, "Strengths of Their Own: Homeschooling Across America" was published in 1997 by Brian Ray, long associated with the National Home Education Research Institute and familiar to many homeschool families. The second study, also highly publicized, is the work of Lawrence Rudner, who works out of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation at the University of Maryland. The title of his paper is "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998." These two studies receive so much attention because of their size and quality. However, several dozen other studies are also

available, and the results strike a remarkable harmony in terms of how well homeschool students do. So, just how well do they do?

To understand how well they actually are doing, we need to understand the measurements that researchers are using to draw their conclusions. In the case of academic performance, the measurement is almost always a standardized achievement test. A standardized achievement test is nothing more than a test that has been constructed to evaluate an individual's level of achievement in academic subjects. It does this by comparing that individual's scores on the test with a normative group—individuals who take the test before it is released for general use. On these tests an average score is expressed as being at the 50th percentile, with half of those taking the test scoring below the 50th percentile and half scoring above the 50th percentile. Also, the higher (and lower) you go in terms of percentiles, the fewer people will have those types of scores. When you begin to see that homeschool students score anywhere from the 80th to 87th percentile in all subjects in Brian Ray's study or from the 75th to 85<sup>th</sup> percentile in most subjects in Rudner's study, you begin to appreciate that homeschool students score significantly higher than public school students on tests of achievement. And these two research papers are not the only ones showing these drastic differences.

Paula Rothermel (Rothermel, P. (2000) "Home-Education: Rationales, Practices and Outcomes. A Working Paper." University of Durham. <http://www.dru.ac.uk/p.j.rothermel/Research/Researchpaper/BERAWorkingpaper.htm>), drawing from the work at the PIPS project at the University of Durham (an assessment program), found that more than 63 percent of homeschool students score anywhere from the 75th to 84th percentile level in receptivity to math and language. By comparison, only 5.1 percent of the public school students scored as well. She also found that after three years of homeschooling, homeschool students begin to really outpace their public school peers. Patrick Basham (Basham, P. (2001) "Home Schooling: From Extreme to Mainstream. A Frasier Institute Occasional Paper." *Public Policy Sources*. Num. 51. <http://www.frasierinstitute.ca>) looked at the SAT scores of homeschool students in Pennsylvania and found that they scored at the 86th percentile in reading and at the 73rd percentile in math. Given that the SAT strives to be a well-constructed measurement of achievement and is used by colleges as a measure of preparedness for college-level work, these scores suggest that homeschool students are being very adequately prepared academically. Add to this short list of studies the number of smaller studies cited by Brian Ray (Ray, B.D. (2000) "Home Schooling: The Amelioration of Negative Influences on Learning?" *Peabody Journal of Education*. Vol 75, Num. 1&2, 71-106.), including the works of J. Wartes and the results of testing done by the Alaska, Tennessee, and Oregon Departments of Education. Study after study shows that homeschooling stands up exceedingly well on standardized tests, particularly in comparison to public schooling. One other interesting note is that there is a complete lack of studies showing that public school students outperform homeschool students. With that said, it is clear that homeschooling is more than adequately preparing students—it is doing an outstanding job.

Research into the academic performance of homeschoolers also reveals some very encouraging facts about the reasons for these positive outcomes. To begin with, the amount of money spent per student does not seem to affect outcome significantly. Families spending less than \$200 a year per student on educational material had their students typically score above the 70th percentile. This is in contrast to the nationwide scores in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile despite an average expenditure of \$5,325 per year on public school students. (Rudner, L.M. (1999) "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998.") As homeschool spending goes up, so does performance, but again, all homeschool students, on average, outscore public school students, and in one study only 12.6 percent of homeschool families spent over \$1,000 per student per year.

Formal teacher training does not affect the outcomes either. Patrick Basham (Basham, P. (2001) "Home Schooling: From Extreme to Mainstream.") writes, "Interestingly, having at least one parent who is a certified teacher has no significant effect on the achievement levels of homeschooled students. The test scores of students whose parents have ever held a teaching certificate were only three percentile points higher than those whose parents had not" (p.11).

There is also no significant difference in the achievement scores of homeschool students enrolled in a full-service curriculum and homeschool students that use an eclectic curriculum (Rudner, L.M. (1999) "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998."); boys and girls do equally well on assessments (Rudner, L.M. (1999) "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998."); and parent level of education holds no bearing on outcomes. (Rothermel, P. (2000) "Home-Education: Rationales, Practices and Outcomes." Basham, P. (2001) "Home Schooling: From Extreme to Mainstream.")

Of particular interest is the effect of state regulation of homeschooling on the achievement outcomes. What the research is showing is that state regulation, regardless of level, did not affect achievement scores. (Ramirez, L.P. (2003) *Is Home Schooling Right for Kids? Family Matters*. Green, J.P. (2000) "The Education Freedom Index." *Civic Report*. Num. 14. [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_14.htm](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_14.htm)) Jay P. Greene of the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research worked to develop the Educational Freedom Index (EFI) to measure the amount of freedom states grant to parents to educate their children. Using this instrument, he evaluated states in terms of student achievement levels compared to the level of freedom each state allowed parents. What he concluded in his research was pleasantly reassuring, he states: "Put simply, states with more educational freedom have higher average student achievement" (p. 4). (Basham, P. (2001) "Home Schooling: From Extreme to Mainstream.") This is a strong argument for unencumbered access to homeschooling as an option without a lot of government involvement or oversight. These results in terms of what does (or really, what doesn't) make a difference in terms of academic outcomes runs very contrary to the ideology of

critics of homeschooling who believe that homeschooling should use government-approved curriculums, be taught only by certified teachers, be overseen by government educational programs, and be heavily regulated. The results do demonstrate that despite the lack of these things, homeschoolers thrive.

## Socialization

Well, what about socialization? Aren't homeschool children isolated and deprived of adequate social opportunities? Measuring socialization is more difficult than measuring achievement. With achievement you simply test a child's ability to answer questions of an academic nature. Testing socialization relies on measures that attempt to quantify opinion and observation. Despite this difficulty, tests do exist to evaluate the level of socialization in individuals. Socialization can also be assessed by evaluating aspects of life such as number and quality of friendships, community involvement, or social activity outside the home. When homeschool children are evaluated by these measures, what do they show?

The research again shows encouraging news for homeschoolers. Researchers typically conclude that homeschooled children are, at minimum, as socialized as any other group of children, and in many cases they are found to be better socialized. In a particularly interesting study, researchers trained observers to rate children on a number of social skills from a prepared checklist. The raters were not told if they were rating homeschooled or public schooled children (this is called a blind study). The raters consistently rated the homeschool children as acting in a friendly and positive fashion. In contrast, the public school children were rated as aggressive, bad, and competitive. The researchers concluded that home educated children were socially adept and did not display behavioral problems above the norm. (Basham, P. (2001) "Home Schooling: From Extreme to Mainstream.") In several studies that used more sophisticated psychological tests, homeschool students demonstrated higher scores on communication, daily living skills, socialization, and social maturity. They also showed higher scores on family and community subscales. The conclusion of the researchers in these studies was that homeschool children are well socialized without exposure to large groups of children and that there was no substantial difference in terms of assertiveness or self-concept. (Medlin, R.G. (2000) "Home Schooling and the Question of Socialization." *Peabody Journal of Education*. Vol. 75, Num. 1&2, 107-123.)

In terms of friendships, homeschoolers demonstrate that they do just as well with friends and that they have the same number of close friends as public school children. The researchers did find that homeschool children worry more about their friendships and are more susceptible to negative emotional impacts when friendships go poorly. They concluded that homeschool students rely more heavily on their "best friendship" than do their public school peers. These same researchers found that homeschool students reported a more positive attitude toward teachers and coaches, more positive relationships with parents, a higher self-esteem, and more positive interpersonal relationships. Oddly

enough, they also found that homeschool students express less confidence in their academic performance than public school children do, prompting the researchers to conclude that homeschool students may actually feel more confident socially than they do academically. (19. Reavis, R. & Zakriski (2005) “Experts Speak Out: Are Home Schooled Children Socially at Risk or Socially Protected?” )

Homeschool children are involved in a great number of activities outside the home and are typically more civically involved. They also interact with a wider range of individuals from young to old and report themselves that they do not feel socially deprived. They are often rated as being friendlier and less peer dependent for their values, particularly as they grow older. In short, it is clear that homeschooled children are not missing out on socialization and are being adequately equipped to join the world of adults. Any accusation that homeschooling denies children the opportunity to be adequately socialized is just not accurate. In fact, the opposite appears to be true. These children often turn out the way parents and society in general would want children to turn out: friendly, confident, civically minded and involved, socially mature with good relationships with the authority figures in their lives, and possessing a moral compass that is independent of peers.

#### Other Criticisms

As evidence mounts in favor of homeschooling, critics shift their arguments away from concerns about academics and socialization and begin to present new “negatives” of homeschooling. Here are three examples of such arguments against homeschooling. The first is founded upon the notion that the government has a responsibility to ensure the education of its population in order to create productive citizens. From this reasoning, Rob Reich argues that homeschooling needs to be regulated because of government’s responsibility to assure adequate citizen preparation. (Reich, R. (2005) “Why Home Schooling Should Be Regulated.” *Home Schooling in Full View: A Reader*. Information Age Publishing. 109-120. [http://www.stanford.edu/~reich/other\\_documents/Reich%20RegulatedHomeschooling%202005.pdf](http://www.stanford.edu/~reich/other_documents/Reich%20RegulatedHomeschooling%202005.pdf)) But if the ability to participate in the community and contribute to the overall well-being of society is a measure of a good citizen, then the above-mentioned research shows that the homeschooled are being very adequately prepared to become citizens. One researcher concluded that homeschoolers do form an identity of citizen and are actually more civically involved than their public school peers.(Arai, A.B. (1999) “Home Schooling and the Redefinition of Citizenship.” *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. Vol. 7, Num. 27. <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v7n27.html>)

Reich also argues that the government has a vested interest in regulating the education of all children as it has a vested interest in the preparation of citizens. But we have already seen that regulation does not produce better outcomes. Furthermore, to call for regulation of an institution that is producing outstanding results while the institution that is heavily

regulated (public school) is struggling to produce positive outcomes is a very weak argument.

The second argument against homeschooling is presented by Chris Lubienski. (Ray, B.D. (2000) "Home Schooling: The Amelioration of Negative Influences on Learning?") In essence, his argument is that homeschooling removes social capital from the public schools, leaving a struggling institution with even less valuable resources. It is undeniable that, when parents homeschool, they and their children are no longer a part of the public school system. But how does this impact the educational system? Mr. Lubienski writes that these types of parents are the involved type who should stay involved and work to improve the system rather than abandon it. This argument has two flaws. Those involved parents are involved to the extent that the school system impacts their children. They are going to advocate largely for changes that impact their children only, and any parents who are more committed to the educational system are not, most likely, choosing to homeschool. The second flaw is that while the social capital is taken out, the money remains in the system at the state level. In reality, then, the states would have fewer students to educate with the same amount of money. This should be welcome news, as money is often cited as a major issue in terms of school failure.

Mr. Lubienski goes on to claim that homeschooling is a flight from the public school and nothing more than an exit strategy. Again, there is truth in his statement. But the argument that he builds from this premise has an odd logic to it. He attempts to say that leaving the school system rather than staying is shortchanging the democratic process of debate or the deliberative process of public education that serves the common good. But isn't the exit from the public school for either moral or academic reasons a democratic statement in and of itself? Homeschool families do not wish to see the end of public school. They often do not even resent the fact that their tax dollars continue to go to public schools. They simply wish to have the right to educate their children in the way they see fit, the ultimate in parental involvement. Hence, the "exit strategy" is a part of the democratic deliberative process concerning education, not the silent voice that Mr. Lubienski would suggest.

The third and final argument against homeschooling comes from the National Education Association (NEA). The clear stance of the NEA against homeschooling should be recognized as a statement coming from a labor union. As such, the NEA's position on homeschooling is as it should be: one that protects the jobs of its members. The most troubling aspect of the NEA's position is not the position itself but the perception of the NEA by the general public and by government institutions. The NEA is often seen as being authoritative in terms of what is good and right concerning the education of children, particularly since its members are educational specialists. As with any union, the union itself does not represent the thoughts and beliefs of all its members, and many public school teachers have no negative thoughts or impressions of homeschooling. But the position of the NEA itself, when it is seen as authoritative, represents a troubling reality for homeschool families. In fact, the public needs to recognize that the NEA is



first a labor union and will decide its position on homeschooling—or anything else that would result in fewer jobs for educators—accordingly, even in light of growing support for homeschooling in the research.

### Potential Reasons for These Outcomes

While there is no way to be certain why homeschooling is producing such positive outcomes, Brian Ray approaches this question in a way that attempts to quantify attributes of homeschooling that contribute to its success. Noting what typically makes for a successful educational experience in other research projects, he notes that many of those elements can be found in homeschooling, including parental involvement, small class sizes, tutoring, positive social interaction, and individualized attention. (Ray, B.D. (2000) “Home Schooling: The Amelioration of Negative Influences on Learning?”)

The researchers also speculated that the flexibility of homeschooling contributes to the success, as well as the less formal qualities that homeschoolers have a tendency to develop over time. Families had a tendency to gradually adopt a style of education that worked for them, adapting to the needs of the student as well as the teacher and family. Of note was the idea that parents were able to tune in to the needs of their children and make the necessary changes to make the most of the education. (Ensign, J. (2000) “Defying the Stereotypes of Special Education: Home School Students.” *Peabody Journal of Education*. Vol. 75, 147-158.) The idea that children in homeschool situations never leave the educational environment also may contribute to the overall success of this form of training. Parents who homeschool are likely to try to make an educational experience out of many activities. As a result, learning becomes associated with real life experiences.

Research may not be able to fully explain why homeschooling works so well, in part because of the small amount of research available. But it does appear that the homeschool situation provides elements that are ideal for learning and that the flexible, customizable approach to learning in a natural environment makes for good outcomes. Add a teacher with strong personal motivation to see that his or her students succeed, and you may have a powerful formula for remarkable outcomes.

### Conclusions

A conclusion to be drawn from the research is that homeschooling is far more effective than critics would like. The amount of literature and studies showing not just adequate but superior academic performance is very convincing that homeschooling works and works well. The lack of studies that report negative outcomes for homeschooling also speaks loudly about its effectiveness. Unquestionably, there is a need, from a research point of view, for more quality research, particularly for controlled studies. Some homeschool families are reluctant to participate, concerned in part about researchers’ intent. Are they looking for ways to make homeschooling better, or will the research be

used to create a call for intrusion into homeschooling? To be sure, homeschool communities are leery of investigations into their homes, largely due to decades of negative attitudes toward homeschooling and, at times, outright persecution. (Hill, P.T. (2000) "Home Schooling and the Future of Public Education.")

With the evidence of research backing homeschoolers, the burden is on critics of homeschooling to demonstrate their point of view with equal veracity. Unfortunately, as long as those critics remain hostile to homeschooling they will be hard pressed to get eager participants in their research studies. However, with a growing body of evidence that homeschooling works, critics have little option but to demonstrate otherwise. Families who currently homeschool can feel confident that they are doing something very positive for their children. Those who are considering homeschooling can be assured that they can do it with remarkable results.

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