



## Choosing to Home School: Preliminary Results of a Survey of Parents

by

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Interest in school choice continues to grow as the political and social milieu surrounding it gains momentum. What was initially an idea that seemed almost unpatriotic, at least in the eyes of the majority of our publicly schooled populace, is now an increasingly acceptable American practice. Indeed, it is a serious mistake to ignore or discount the recent growth in school choice options and the reasons increasing numbers of Americans are choosing alternatives to conventional public education. This *Spotlight* reports on a survey of one segment of the school choice population: “homeschoolers,” that is, parents who have chosen to educate their children at home. It explores the reasoning for their decision to home school their children and suggests implications for our system of public education.

As part of a larger ongoing study of parental choice of schools, parents from 55 home-schooling families in south central Pennsylvania were interviewed about why they decided to engage in home schooling. Preliminary analysis of the interview data indicates a tendency toward pedagogical reasons for choosing home schooling as an alternative to public schooling, but the picture is complex, as we discuss below. Data were gathered in one of three ways: personal interviews, phone interviews, and constructed written responses.

Systematic analysis of the data by one of the researchers, who has been somewhat of an insider to the home-schooling community in south central Pennsylvania for more than a decade, led to the creation of categories for grouping the interview responses. Though the categories confirm previous studies (see Valle 1998; Valle 1997; Marshall & Valle, 1996), it is important to note that categories, by definition, limit the understanding of the phenomenological complexity inherent in human decision making (Valle, 1998). Despite the limits inherent in the process of the social science research done here, the categories that have emerged offer useful information to policy makers and practitioners who deal with educational issues.

### Results

The following paragraphs rank the categorical responses for each question in order of frequency (from most mentioned to least mentioned). The numerals following each category identify how many times statements that constitute the category were mentioned; categories with less than three responses are not included.

**Question #1:** What caused you to decide to home school?  
Categorization of Responses: pedagogical concerns 23; negative peer influence 11; Christian beliefs 10; administrative/teacher behavior 7; parental influence 6; health issues 3; emotional readiness 3; at risk 3; literature 3

**Question #2:** What sources of information did you rely on in your decision to home school?  
Categorization of Responses: word of mouth 45; literature 18; Internet 6; para-church (radio, seminars) 3; support group 3

**Question #3:** What sources of information were most influential for your decision?  
Categorization of Responses: word of mouth 30; literature 7; support group 3; personal experience 3; church 3

**Question #4:** What organizations or groups of people did you turn to for information?  
Categorization of Responses: word of mouth 20; support group 16; church 9; curriculum fair 7; PA Homeschoolers (organization) 7; literature 8; Christian beliefs 3

**Question #5:** How important were community organizations or faith-based organizations as sources of information for your decision?  
Categorization of Responses: very important 7; not important 10; support group 10; church 8

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**Question #6:** How much was your decision to home school influenced by things your public school or school district had done or failed to do? If so, what things?

Categorization of Responses: pedagogy 18; lack of Christian world view 12; administrative/teacher behavior 11; peer influence 6; not influenced by school 5; public school experience positive 3

**Question #7:** Have you noticed any changes in how your public school or school district is dealing with, or responding to, homeschoolers? If so, what has changed?

Categorization of Responses: no change 15; consistently friendly 10; consistently offensive or defensive 7; sports are not an option 3

### Analysis of Data

The dominant reasons for parents choosing home schooling as an alternative to public schooling involve concerns about pedagogy, the negative influence of peers, and Christian beliefs. Taken together, these concerns are inherently ideological because what constitutes acceptable pedagogy, negative peer influence, and religious beliefs are value-laden constructions. They are inextricably linked, based on fundamental presuppositions about what constitutes a worthy curriculum or course. The perception of this growing population is that ideological alignment is more critical than teacher certification. Effective teaching—the ability to bring about desired educational outcomes—is defined in fundamentally different ways based on fundamentally different presuppositions (Cooper, 2003).

Parents who recognize deficiencies in the teaching profession, relative to their ideological frame, demonstrate a degree of sophistication about curricular issues. Though some of the home-schooling parents interviewed did not adequately appreciate the complexities and demands of the task of the public educator, the fact that they focused on the educational needs of their own children seems reasonable. These parents were inclined to extend their parenting to formal teaching, given their deep concerns about meeting the unique educational and emotional needs of their children, the influence of the peer drug culture, and the overall effects public schooling might have on their children's beliefs. Home schooling addresses these concerns.

Perhaps the aforementioned observations suggest that inviting parent involvement would be a place for public school educators to begin. If done well, inviting parental involvement in the classroom could help parents feel more secure about school culture (as they become partakers in it) and could lighten the instructional load for the teacher (as parents assist students). Moreover, if invited, some of these parents would likely be happy to share their faith-based beliefs and, in turn, might come to see the value in being one of many religious voices expressed in the public sphere.

The idea that religious or ideological issues are important parental concerns is as old as the common school movement itself. Horace Mann's universalistic effort to appease the religious voices of the nineteenth century by promoting daily Bible reading in the common school was

problematic for American Catholics who asked, "Whose Bible?" It has long been known that beliefs and values are closely linked to the decision to home school one's children. What is notable is the ever-increasing diversity in American culture juxtaposed with policies that do not adequately embrace that diversity. The expectation that public schools should "leave no child behind" by assuming that politically derived standards are no longer problematic ignores lessons gained from curriculum history as well as critical theories that "deconstruct" the taken-for-granted assumptions made by the dominant culture (Derrida, 1972). These issues need to be carefully examined and debated by various stakeholders. The increasing growth in alternative schooling arrangements may suggest a failure to include diverse voices sufficiently in the public conversation related to education.

The purposes of public schooling are multifaceted, not simple. If public schooling were only concerned with promoting democracy and tolerance, that would be challenging enough. Meeting the needs of each learner, as many school mission statements profess, is an extraordinary challenge. Some of the home-schooling parents (called "supervisors" under Pennsylvania law) interviewed keenly grasped the inherent contradiction between the mission statements of the public schools and their actual ability to deliver on them. School administrators interviewed also expressed a realistic view of their schools' capabilities. Parents, community groups, and schools need to undertake an open and ongoing conversation to clarify what constitutes the healthy and reasonable purposes and boundaries of public schools. As these conversations develop, perhaps diversity will be viewed as an opportunity for civic engagement rather than separation or dis-integration.

Again, the implication is that parental involvement needs to be broad and inclusive, not relegated to the innocuous parent-teacher organization, whose function is readily limited to bake sales. Parents need to be empowered along with students, and a culture of civic involvement needs to be nurtured. Both public school educators and parent educators who home school their children need to come together to consider how the shared civic community can be more effectively shared.

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