

The Changing Landscape of Homeschooling in the United States

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Introduction

Educating children at home is a growing practice in the United States: the homeschool movement—frequently left out of the conversation about education—has much to teach us about creating more customized and effective school systems aimed at producing better outcomes for students. Homeschool families are hyper-autonomous units with tremendous freedom to create curriculum, redesign typical learning pathways, and build innovative partnerships.

Homeschooling is not a monolith and it is not static. These diverse homeschooling families are taking several innovative approaches to redesigning education—forming partnerships with districts, organizing themselves into collaboratives, and finding ways to promote equity.

Homeschooling has been legal in every state since the 1990s. While only 3 percent of K-12 students in the United States are homeschooled, this percentage has grown since 1999 and shows signs of continuing to increase. Homeschooling impacts the lives of millions of children and yet is understudied compared to other sectors of U.S. education.

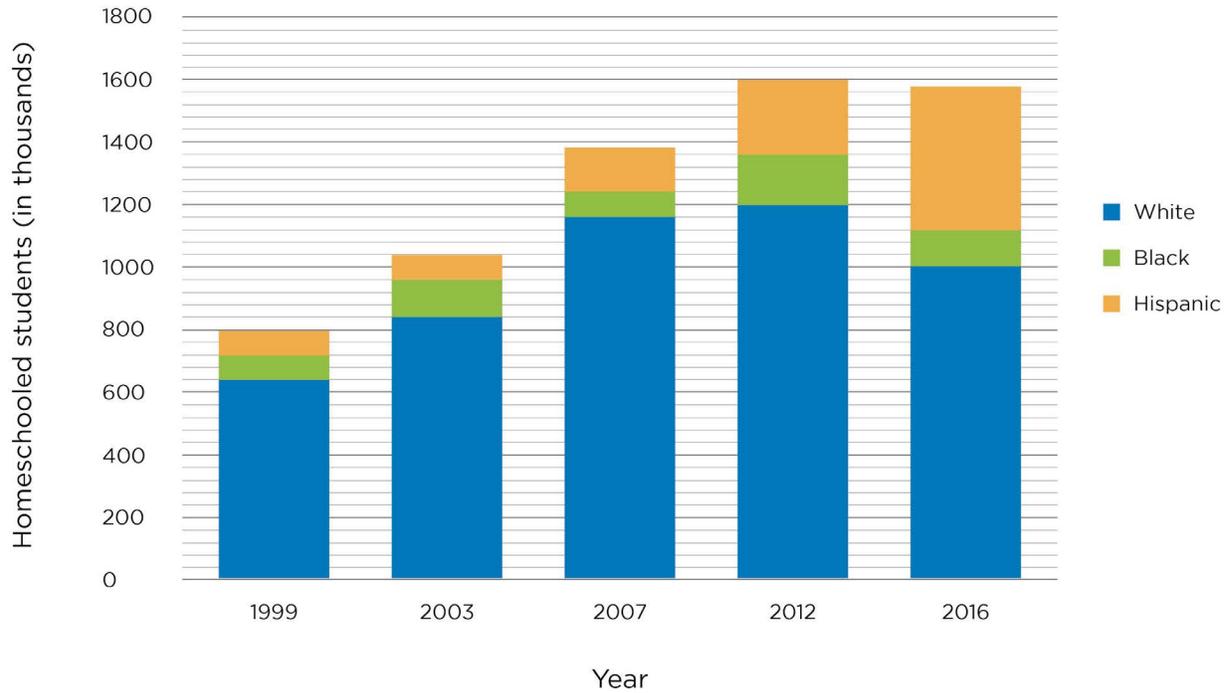
This brief describes the state of homeschooling in the U.S. in 2019. Section I explores the changing demographics of homeschoolers. Section II gives an overview of new forms of homeschooling, including hybrid models. Section III outlines the variety of state policies that govern homeschooling.

Homeschooling’s Changing Demographics

The nature of homeschooling—once seen as the exclusive domain of right-wing Christian families—is changing. The diversity of families opting out of traditional public schools is growing. Black families are increasingly rejecting traditional district schools in favor of homeschooling. Motives for opting out vary, but many black families cite racism and a lack of opportunity for black students in the traditional classroom.¹ Cheryl Fields-Smith, an associate professor of Educational Theory and Practice at the University of Georgia, cites “the marginalization of African American family engagement” as a key factor driving black families out of public schools. The number of homeschool students is notoriously difficult to measure, but the National Center for Education Statistics reports that there are 132,000 black homeschooling families in the U.S.—8 percent of the total population of homeschoolers.²

Homeschooling is even more prevalent among Hispanic families: over 400,000 of the families who choose to homeschool in the U.S. identify as Hispanic, representing 26 percent of the total population of homeschoolers.³ Given the relative size of the Hispanic homeschooling community, it is surprisingly understudied. Almost no scholarly research has been conducted on the motivations and practices of Hispanic families who choose to homeschool.⁴

FIGURE 1. The Changing Demographics of Homeschooling in the United States



Source: National Center for Education Statistics, “Number and percentage of homeschooled students ages 5 through 17 with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through 12th grade, by selected child, parent, and household characteristics: Selected years, 1999 through 2016,” table 206.10.

Families of color are not alone in choosing homeschooling as an alternative to public school. Though no data are available, preliminary research suggests that students who identify as LGBTQ are taking advantage of homeschooling as an opportunity to escape the bullying, peer pressure, and shaming that are endemic to many public schools.⁵

The diversity of homeschoolers in the U.S. mirrors the diversity of all students nationally. The homeschooling community includes Muslim and Jewish families, military families, families of gifted students and of those with special needs. Homeschoolers run the political spectrum from left to right and the economic spectrum from wealthy to poor. Regardless of demographics, homeschooling families are finding new ways to organize and are blurring the line between traditional school and homeschool.

New Forms of Homeschooling

Homeschooling was once a “yes or no” choice for parents. Either students attended a traditional school or they were taught by their parents at home. A combination of technology and evolving state policy has changed the nature of how parents choose schooling for their children. They may now customize their level of involvement with other parents and public schools. Some of the choices parents now have at their disposal include:

- Online resources
- Co-ops
- District extracurricular participation
- Homeschool assistance programs
- Microschools

Online Resources

In a connected world, collaboration among homeschool families is as easy as setting up a Facebook page. Every state has an organization that manages information and resources for homeschool families. These organizations serve as clearinghouses—connecting families to curriculum, to field trip opportunities, and to one another. The [Massachusetts Home Learning Association](#), for example, guides families to local networks of like-minded parents and students. Similar resources and networks exist for homeschool families who share a common race, religion, or pedagogical approach. [National Black Home Educators](#), for example, allows black families around the country to access information and connect with other black homeschool families.

Homeschool Co-ops

Homeschooling can happen outside the home. Recognizing the advantages to be reaped from collaboration, homeschool families of all types are forming cooperatives to increase the opportunities available to their children. An informal cooperative of black families in Georgia, for example, serves as a support group for parents to catch up on and share ideas about curriculum. While parents meet, students participate in enrichment activities, such as learning chess from a local master. In another cooperative in San Antonio, students attend daily classes taught by parents, who are paid, at a local church. The arrangement resembles a traditional school—with staff, bylaws, and a curriculum—but allows parents to maintain total control over the level of their children’s involvement.⁶

Partial Day Schools

Many parents want the flexibility of homeschooling combined with the opportunities of a traditional school. The Catholic-affiliated [Regina Caeli](#) schools offer a hybrid model where students attend school one or two days a week and are homeschooled the rest of the week. The schools are located around the country and are designed to give students the “best of both worlds.” Students gain the experience of learning in a traditional classroom and reap the benefit of individualized home education. The partial-week model also allows Regina Caeli to keep tuition low.

District Extracurricular Participation

Policies surrounding the accessibility of public school opportunities to homeschool students vary widely by state (see next section). However, in many states and districts, homeschool students may choose to participate in sports, theater, arts, and other extracurricular activities offered by their local school district while completing core educational curriculum at home.

Homeschool Assistance Programs

Along with private schools like Regina Caeli, many districts have recognized the desire for flexibility among parents when choosing how much to engage their children in public schools. In response, some districts have created programs allowing homeschool families to access district resources on an à la carte basis.

The [Olympic Regional Learning Academy](#) (ORLA), for example, is a homeschool assistance program run by the Olympia School District in Washington state. ORLA provides homeschool students in kindergarten through 12th grades access to courses taught by licensed teachers, free of cost. Students and their families choose which courses they are interested in, attend on campus, and spend the remainder of their time being homeschooled. The result is what one parent describes as a “community college” for K-12 students, with students building their schedule based only on the courses they want to take. In addition to classes, ORLA provides access to guidance counselors to assist students with the high school-to-college transition.

Microschools

While not technically homeschooling, a growing number of microschools are embracing the principles of homeschooling in devising innovative new models for education. While there is no set definition of a microschool, they tend to be small, sometimes enrolling as few as 20 students, and often blend technology, personalized instruction, and a high level of family and community engagement—including home instruction—to create a customized experience for each student. [QuantumCamp](#), for example, provides math and science courses to homeschool students in the Bay Area one day a week, much like a homeschool co-op.

Homeschool Policy

Homeschooling is legal in every state but the regulations that govern how it operates vary widely. Some states impose strict requirements on parents, while others adopt a more laissez-faire attitude. To illustrate the diversity of homeschooling policies across states, this section details the approaches that two different states, Iowa and New York, take in five key areas (it also includes a discussion of the relationship between homeschooling and Education Savings Accounts):

- Access to district resources
- School finance
- Accountability
- Notification

Access to District Resources

In many states, students who are homeschooled still have access to district resources. Iowa’s statute offers a variety of options for combining home-based instruction with traditional public school instruction. Homeschooled students in Iowa may choose to dually enroll in their home district, which allows them to access any course or extracurricular available to traditional students. This grants students a high degree of flexibility and control over their own learning; a student might attend high school only to take calculus and play soccer, and complete the rest of their learning at home. Under Iowa’s open-enrollment law, homeschool students may also take advantage of course offerings at schools outside of their home district.

In addition to dual enrollment, Iowa law allows districts the option of offering homeschool assistance programs. These programs are less intensive than dual enrollment and allow families to access resources such as textbooks or standardized test information. The Des Moines Home Instruction Program, for example, provides families with access to support from a licensed teacher, as well as opportunities to take part in scheduled enrichment programs.

Even if families choose not to take advantage of dual enrollment or homeschool assistance programs, they are entitled to consult with a licensed teacher twice per quarter, provided they meet certain reporting and accountability requirements (discussed below).⁷

By contrast, New York has no dual-enrollment option and expressly prohibits homeschool students from accessing district courses outside of a few narrowly tailored programs. New York homeschool students are also ineligible to participate in school sports and activities, although exceptions to this policy can be made at the district level.⁸

Spotlight: Alaska

Alaska's unique geography has driven it to develop a novel system for supporting homeschool families through correspondence programs. In Alaska, funding for homeschooling is provided directly to individual families through district-run correspondence programs. If a family chooses to enroll in an accredited home learning program, they may use an annual per-pupil allotment to purchase textbooks and other educational resources.⁹

School Finance

How a state funds homeschool students who take advantage of district resources may influence how likely districts are to create opportunities for hybrid learning. In Iowa, if a student chooses to dually enroll in homeschool and their home district, the district counts them as .1 students for state funding purposes. If a student chooses to access the homeschool assistance program, they are counted as .3 students.¹⁰ This additional funding has incentivized districts around the state to create more robust homeschool programs.¹¹

In New York, fractional funding is available to districts who provide the limited number of options required by law to homeschool students (gifted, special education, and occupational programs). However, no additional funding exists for engaging homeschool students in enrichment programs.¹²

Accountability

A homeschool family's obligation to assess their child annually varies by state. A few states require standardized testing, others give parents a range of assessment options, and the majority require no demonstration of academic progress or achievement.

Iowa laws afford parents complete freedom over whether, and how, homeschool students are assessed; state law requires no assessment. However, if students access dual-enrollment opportunities, or attend a homeschool assistance program, assessment is then required. Assessment does not need to take the form of a standardized test. Parents may choose to fulfill the state's requirements by submitting a portfolio, a report card from a correspondence school, or standardized testing results.¹³

New York's laws are stricter, though still loose compared to requirements in school districts. In 4th through 8th grades, homeschooling parents in New York are required to administer a standardized test to their children. Parents may choose from a long list of approved standardized tests; they are not required to take the state's regents examination. In rare cases, a student's standardized test results can cause their home instruction program to be placed on probation, which entails monitoring from a district official. But it is unclear how often homeschool families are actually placed on probation.¹⁴

Notification

There are a wide variety of regulations and state policies around whether or not parents must notify the state of their intent to homeschool their children. In Iowa, parents do not need to report that they will be homeschooling their children, but notification is required if parents and students want to access to homeschool assistance programs or dual-enrollment options.¹⁵

New York is again a foil to Iowa's permissive requirements: parents are required to notify their home school district of their intent to homeschool their children. Parents must also submit an annual Individual Home Instruction Plan, which the school district may either approve or deny.¹⁶

Students with Disabilities

New York requires that the home districts of homeschooled students with disabilities provide access to special education services. These services must be “equitable” and on par with the services provided to students attending traditional schools. In practice, this could mean a student going to a school to receive services, or the district sending a service provider to a family's home.¹⁷

Iowa students may receive special education services if they choose to dually enroll in their home district or submit the required accountability and reporting paperwork (standardized testing and reporting forms). If parents choose to educate their children on an entirely independent basis, then special education services are not available.

Education Savings and Homeschooling

Education Savings Accounts (ESA) allow parents to use state funding to create individualized plans for educating their children. Six states currently allow for ESAs. Only Nevada makes spending from an ESA available to all families on an unrestricted basis, and the program is currently unfunded by the state legislature.¹⁸ Arizona also allows ESAs to fund home education programs, but only for students who meet particular eligibility requirements.¹⁹ North Carolina,²⁰ Florida,²¹ and Tennessee²² allow ESA funds to be used for homeschooling only when a student has a disability, and Mississippi²³ does not allow homeschooling to be funded through an ESA.

Federal Coverdell accounts work similarly to state ESAs. These accounts cannot be used to fund homeschooling but can be used for “eligible elementary and secondary schools.” In states where a homeschool is considered to be a private school, Coverdell accounts can be applied.²⁴

Summary and Implications

The proportion of American families opting to homeschool is growing quickly, especially among black and Hispanic families. For that reason alone, it is a movement worth understanding and watching. Why are so many families making this choice and are there ways in which public education might better meet their needs? What do homeschool families lose or gain by opting out of the public system? How do different forms of homeschooling collaboratives function?

The ways in which homeschool families are curating and blending a variety of education and social learning opportunities has interesting implications for how education can be more agile and customized to suit each student's and each family's needs. A new nonprofit organization in Connecticut, [Workspace Education](#), is promoting itself as a “co-learning” space, where families and educators can access a wide portfolio of online, microschool, and homeschool opportunities through a membership model. In the future, might public education offer a broader spectrum of offerings and codesign these kinds of portfolios of learning pathways with families? Is there an untapped market for families that want greater customization within public education? CRPE will continue to pursue these broader questions.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

CRPE is a nonpartisan research and policy analysis center at the University of Washington Bothell. We develop, test, and support bold, evidence-based, systemwide solutions to address the most urgent problems in K-12 public education across the country. Our mission is to reinvent the education delivery model, in partnership with education leaders, to prepare all American students to solve tomorrow's challenges. Since 1993 CRPE's research, analysis, and insights have informed public debates and innovative policies that enable schools to thrive. Our work is supported by multiple foundations, contracts, and the U.S. Department of Education.

Endnotes

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