



Homeschooling in America: From Fringe to Future

Editor's Note: *The following guest essay is by Brittany Neff, a Catholic homeschooling mother and writer based in St. Louis, Missouri.*

Imagine a girl, about age 15, sitting in the cozy four-season room of her home. She might be clutching a Jane Austen novel in one hand and a cup of tea in the other. A yellow school bus passes the home and stops at the corner of her lot. Children tumble out, some her age, but many much younger. They just finished the school day, having arrived at 7 a.m., and did not arrive home until about 3:30 p.m. They will have roughly two hours of homework.

The girl started her school day around 10 a.m. She woke up naturally, had the time to prepare and eat a nutritious breakfast, and then powered through her schoolbooks at the kitchen table. Today she focused on her chemistry, Latin and language arts. She completed her school day after roughly three hours of work.

Her siblings worked alongside her. Their mother, doing her household chores, periodically checked in to see how her children were doing. After the girl finished her schoolwork, she went on a walk with a fellow homeschooled friend.

She is enjoying her leisure time with her novel, and tonight she will go to tennis practice at the local community center. She has no homework and will be in bed by 10 p.m. She aspires to be a nurse, and next year will begin classes at her local community college, which will eventually count toward her nursing degree.

This young girl is homeschooled, and her future is bright. By the end of the Progressive Era in the early 20th century, every state in the U.S. had some form of compulsory schooling law. Homeschooling was largely discouraged and unregulated until the 1970s and 1980s. Those who chose to homeschool were generally Christian

conservatives or secular freethinkers. Homeschooling was a fringe movement that was met with official resistance. Families that did homeschool faced truancy charges and were taken to court.

Homeschool advocates sought judicial protection, citing the Supreme Court decision of *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), in which Amish parents challenged a state law requiring children to attend school until the age of 16.¹ The Court ruled that forcing Amish children to attend high school violated their First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. The case centered on ending formal education after eighth grade, and it established a crucial precedent affirming parents' rights to direct their children's education. While few today advocate ending formal education after eighth grade, the case laid a legal foundation supporting homeschooling as a legitimate and personalized educational path.

Pandemic Pivot

By 1993, all 50 states legalized homeschooling, but the oversight varied greatly by state. As a result of this legalization, the number of homeschooled children grew from 15,000 in the 1980s to an estimated 2 million just prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.² Homeschooling was on the radar, both legally and statistically, but it was not something most families seriously considered.

The Covid-19 pandemic took the world by storm, and education was certainly affected. Spring 2020 emergency school closures sent educators and parents alike scrambling to maintain the semblance of a school education at home. In the first weeks, when the closures were expected to be brief, students were often given packets of worksheets or would meet with their classes virtually for an hour, with the rest of the day dependent on parental oversight.

As the fog of uncertainty lifted to reveal a longer road ahead, schools and parents adapted to make the school day more structured. In most instances, students were provided with electronic devices, and virtual learning went on throughout the day. The virtual learning was balanced by individual work to be reviewed by the parent or teacher after the fact. Later in the pandemic, this virtual learning combined with in-person learning to create a hybrid model. Today, the Covid school shutdowns are almost universally reviled as a failure of educational policy.

Many parents grudgingly went along for lack of choice. For the first time, they balanced being co-teachers in their child's education with their own careers and responsibilities. Some came face-to-face with their children's curriculum, only to cringe at what they saw.³ Others found they liked spending the days with their children and being hands-on in the learning process. These parents began to see homeschooling as a genuine option.

A Dramatic Increase

In 2019, prior to the pandemic, homeschooling statistically represented only a small movement—just 3.4 percent of school-age children were homeschooled.⁴ At the peak of the pandemic, most children experienced their schooling at home, while some were withdrawn from their registered school of attendance to be homeschooled. In 2020-21, 6 percent of American students were reported to be homeschooled.⁵ More recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey show that *6.3 to 7.9 percent of school-age children were homeschooled in 2024, comprising 3.4 to 4.3 million children.*⁶ *In just five years, the number of homeschooled children in the U.S. has doubled.*

The pandemic fueled the start of this growth, and perhaps without parents having found themselves in the role of co-teachers, it would not have been so rapid. Yet, several years after the pandemic, the number of homeschooled children continues to grow. Homeschooling is no longer a fringe choice. It has become a significant educational method in the United States.

When considering homeschooling, many assume that the format of the school day is modeled after a traditional classroom. While it can fit that description, this is far from the approach most families take. Homeschoolers are a diverse group. Demographically, it runs the full

gamut of religion, political affiliation, income, education levels and ethnicity. Naturally, the educational approach will vary greatly depending on family resources and priorities. Some of the more common approaches include:

Classical Education: Classical education aims for a structured approach with emphasis on grammar, logic and rhetoric through studying great books, history and language. Generally, families following this approach will purchase their curriculum through a company such as Mother of Divine Grace or The Well-Trained Mind Academy.

Charlotte Mason: A British educator from the late 19th century, Mason emphasized a gentle, literature-rich method of learning. This philosophy cultivates a love of education through “living books,” nature and the arts. “Living books” are engaging works that bring subjects to life, in stark contrast to dry textbooks.

Montessori: Based on the philosophy of Italian physician and educator Maria Montessori, this method is child-led and focused on fostering independence and practical life skills in a tactile environment. This method is particularly popular among parents of young children.

Unschooling: As the name suggests, this method largely rejects the concept of structured learning and is led entirely by the child's interests and motivations.

Hybrid Homeschooling involves a mix of in-home instruction and outside classes, generally provided through a private, part-time school. Students will learn at the school for a portion of the week and are provided a curriculum to follow at home under the direction of the parent for the remainder of the week.

Benefits of Homeschooling

Most families probably use a combination of these approaches to best fit the needs of their children. These methods are best combined with ample usage of extracurricular and social opportunities for children.

The benefits of homeschooling are abundant for most families. Katie Fitzgerald, a mother of five in Maryland, states: “My children are authentically themselves. They have time and space to pursue their God-given gifts and the support and encouragement to persevere in them. They are well-spoken and confident around children and

adults.” This may be one of the more common reasons parents cite when they make the choice to homeschool. They want their children to be confident and free thinking: *in* the world, but not *of* it.

Some parents remember a school experience that was punitive if they were of the rowdier type, while others recall sliding under the radar if they were quiet: their strengths or weaknesses may have gone unnoticed if they kept their head down and followed instructions. Gifted students were often bored and unchallenged, while struggling students felt embarrassed and left behind.

To homeschool is to offer a unique solution to each child, each circumstance, each ability level: that is, to meet them where they are and help them to excel. Whereas the traditional school setting is focused on the collective, the homeschool experience is focused on the individual, so that as an adult, he or she might be a healthy member of the community.

Individual Attention, Flexibility

Lorryn McGarry from Oklahoma homeschools six children and enthusiastically reports: “My children get their childhood back. For millennia, children have been taught for a few hours a day, and the rest of the day is for exploring and climbing and playing. Through homeschooling, this is how I give this centuries-old, developmentally appropriate structure back to my children. They are each other’s greatest playmates.” Lorryn alludes to another great benefit of homeschooling, which is the flexibility of the day.

Much of the school day in a traditional setting is not dedicated to active learning, but to busy-work, transitions and behavior management. A homeschooled child can achieve these same active learning hours at home under the guidance of a parent and forgo some of the less necessary activities. Instead, the world is their oyster! As they get older, some students can begin taking courses for college credit. Students can sharpen skills they are interested in such as art, music, crafts or athletics—and without sacrificing family dinners or relaxation on the weekend.

Children who were homeschooled for the long term (eight or more years) generally report higher levels of optimism, gratitude and life satisfaction as compared to their peers.⁷ They are also less likely to report symptoms

associated with depression and anxiety.⁸ In terms of academics, they tend to outperform their public school peers by 15 to 30 percentile points on standardized tests, indicating that, on average, homeschooling is more efficient than public school.⁹ If homeschooled students generally have better mental health and academic outcomes, what is the argument against homeschooling?

Principal Critiques

Perhaps the loudest concern voiced by those opposed to homeschooling is the question of socialization. They worry that if children aren’t interacting with their peers all day and following the structure of a typical classroom, they will be unable to cope once they leave the nest as adults. Something these naysayers fail to consider is what the world looks like outside of the nest.

Your average adult spends the day surrounded by adults of varying ages, often of different ethnic and economic backgrounds. Compare this to the typical public (or even private) school student. Their peers were born within nine months of their own birth date and often come from similar economic backgrounds. Let’s not forget that school districts are funded by the property tax of the surrounding area, and that to attend most private schools, you must be able to afford the tuition. This sounds considerably more homogeneous than the world that awaits them upon graduation.

By contrast, homeschoolers who are exposed to extracurricular activities (such as a cooperative group, or even regular trips to the local library or playground), are regularly interacting with a wide range of ethnicities, religious backgrounds, economic levels and ages. From a younger age than their peers, they are learning how to collaborate and interact with people who are different from them. Of course, if a family approaches homeschooling from an isolationist mindset, their children may struggle socially. Homeschooling families must be conscientious about integrating their children into the world early and often, or they run the risk of giving homeschoolers a bad name.

The other concern involves educational blind spots in the parent acting as educator, otherwise explained as the inability to teach a subject at the level necessary. This is less likely to be a problem when teaching a young child phonics or arithmetic but is far more likely to be a

concern with high-school-level instruction in foreign languages, math or science. This is solved by outsourcing the subject: by hiring a private tutor, sending the child to a class taught by an expert, or utilizing online learning.

The Road Ahead

Homeschooling in America has always existed alongside a wide spectrum of regulations. Some states impose multiple layers of oversight, requiring parents to file curriculum plans, submit test scores or undergo evaluations. Other states demand very little documentation. Yet, even in states historically considered relaxed, attempts to tighten control can surface.

A recent example is Illinois, where a proposed Homeschool Act (H.B. 2827) would have imposed some harsh penalties, including criminal charges for submitting incomplete paperwork. Parents mobilized in opposition, and the bill was defeated earlier this year. This underscores both the ongoing vulnerability of homeschool freedoms and the steadfast commitment of families to defend them.¹⁰

Taxpayers spend an average of \$16,446 per pupil in public schools.¹¹ With 3.1 million homeschooled students in 2021-22 and the cost of their education largely shifted to their parents (who spent an average of \$600 per student), \$51 billion was saved for taxpayers.¹² This significant cost savings may not continue in the future as school choice options spread to more and more states.¹³

However, most homeschooling families have no financial aid to cover their children's homeschooling costs, and many prefer it this way. More government dollars may equate to more government oversight, which generally gives families less autonomy over their curriculum and

spacing. As homeschooling continues to grow in numbers, it will be interesting to observe how both state and federal laws adapt.

Homeschooling is no longer a fringe experiment. It is an increasingly mainstream educational path rooted in the belief that parents are best equipped to guide their children's learning and development. As laws evolve and educational options expand, one thing remains constant: The home continues to be a powerful place of formation. In homeschooling, families are reclaiming their children's education and finding joy in the process.

For families who are new to homeschooling, see the final endnote below for some reputable online resources to help you get started.¹⁴

¹ *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205 (1972).

² Albert Cheng and Daniel Hamlin, "Contemporary Homeschooling Arrangements: An Analysis of Three Waves of Nationally Representative Data," *Educational Policy* 37, no. 5 (July 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048221103795>.

³ See, e.g., *Mindszenty Report*, September 2023 and July 2021, for discussions of the pervasive infiltration of transgender ideology and critical race theory into U.S. schools.

⁴ <https://hsllda.org/post/homeschooling-continues-to-grow-in-2021>.

⁵ <https://nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/>.

⁶ <https://admissionsly.com/homeschooling-statistics/>.

⁷ <https://readlion.com/op-ed-long-term-homeschoolers-enjoy-most-favorable-levels-of-mental-health-study-finds/>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ <https://homeschoolingbackgrounder.com/average-academic-performance-homeschooled-students/>.

¹⁰ https://edreporteronline.org/documents/august2025_article_3.cfm?utm_source=email&utm_medium=email%20marketing.

¹¹ <https://nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Regarding the spread of school choice options in the U.S., see, e.g., *Mindszenty Report*, July 2023.

¹⁴ **Heart of a Mother:** Offers a broad overview of guidance and curriculum recommendations specifically for Catholic families. <https://www.heartofamother.net/curriculum>.

Homeschooling 101: A breakdown of essential subjects to teach at various age levels. **Home School Legal Defense Association:** A comprehensive source for state laws and legal guidance for homeschool in the United States. <https://hsllda.org/legal>.

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