

The Rise of Christian Homeschooling in the Age of School Choice: God-Fearing Education and Fundamentalism

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In the colonial period of America, almost all education took place in the home. Children were taught by family or by private tutors under the mantra “every man according to his own ability in instructing his children.”¹ In the 1800s, common schools began, providing education to a wider group than ever before (even if ultimately discriminatory to non-white groups), with common schools excluding “black children or white children with “strange” religious beliefs, such as Irish Catholics.”² Common schools also had a significant amount of Protestant biblical instruction, where the day “began with the Lord’s Prayer and readings from the King James version of the Bible, usually read without comment”.³

This religious leaning was very slowly phased out throughout the 19th and 20th centuries and by the 1970s, public schools were officially secular. *Engel v. Vitale* stated “state officials may not compose an official state prayer and require that it be recited in the public schools of the State at the beginning of each school day,” meaning that prayer (and thus an officially sanctioned religion, as was the case with common schools of the past) was prohibited.⁴ By the point that schools had become secular, home education had become an “old-fashioned oddity.”⁵

In addition, since the 1960s, the public education system has been increasingly criticized as ineffective and accused of failing students. During the Cold War, there was a large outcry at the failing of our schools in comparison to Soviet schools, with a professor’s publication “What Ivan

¹ Urban, Wayne J. *American Education: A History*. Jr. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, 2014, 19.

² Ibid, 88.

³ Ibid, 93.

⁴ *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 U.S. 421 (1962)

⁵ Murphy, Joseph. “Riding History: The Organizational Development of Homeschooling in the US.” *ResearchGate*, January 1, 2013.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260191151_Riding_history_The_organizational_development_of_homeschooling_in_the_US.

Knows that Johnny Doesn't," which had "echoed the concern for academic achievement voiced by [...] academic critics of the educational establishment earlier in the decade."⁶

In light of this supposed insufficiency, a movement began "to make education more like a "market" activity," so that states could give parents "choice" like vouchers for private schools.⁷ But at the same time, many children were also being pulled out of public and other alternative schools in order to be homeschooled. The justification many families give for homeschooling is often dissatisfaction with the instruction offered by schools, dissatisfaction with the environment of schools, or because they want religious or "moral" instruction.

This dissatisfaction with school instruction and school secularity indicates a lack of faith in the current state of the education system by parents who choose to homeschool. Additionally, this rise in homeschooling offers an important insight into the public opinion of the public education system, and this rise in homeschooling for religious (often fundamentalist) reasons has important implications for the future of a pluralistic (diverse) society.

My own involvement with homeschooling is a particularly important part of this picture. After a short but difficult time in public education, my family decided to homeschool me. Growing up in homeschool groups, particularly Christian ones, gave me an inside perspective on the landscape of homeschooling today. While I wasn't homeschooled for fundamentalist reasons, many of my peers were. One of my homeschooling groups required that we signed a paper certifying that we wouldn't "introduce new lifestyles" to the group or challenge the norms. Many parents expressed anti-queer views and expressed a desire to keep their children from learning about queer

⁶ Urban, Wayne J. *American Education: A History*. Jr. Urban and Jennings L. Wagoner, 2014, 267.

⁷ Ibid, 358.

identities and queer people, as well as many other "alternative lifestyles" that countered their views.

As seen in visual 2, roughly 3% of the students surveyed are homeschooled. There are roughly 1.5 million homeschooled students in the US!⁸

In visual 1, we can see that 73% of homeschooling families surveyed were unsatisfied with the academic quality of their schools, and 75% wanted to provide 'moral' instruction to their children, and 59% wanted to provide religious instruction. From this we can make important inferences about the types of families who are homeschooling children, most especially that they are dissatisfied with the content and environment of schools, many believing they are teaching morally repulsive things, or that their religion isn't supported. A particularly hot topic was sex education, with multiple parents reporting that they were uncomfortable with the idea of sex education being a school and not a family decision. One parent said "What on God's green earth does a five year old need to know about sex?"⁹ On the state of education and religion, particularly in a Christian context, one homeschooling parent said: "[...] *with the way that things are in the schools where you can't even mention God, you can't even mention the Bible, things like that, that was a concern for us.*"¹⁰

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⁸ National Center for Education Statistics. "2019 Homeschooling and Full-Time Virtual Education Rates," September 11, 2023. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023101>.

⁹ Mazama, A., & Lundy, G. (2014). African American Homeschoolers: The Force of Faith and the Reality of Race in the Homeschooling Experience. *Religion & Education*, 41(3), 265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15507394.2014.899869>

¹⁰ Ibid, 264–265.

homeschooling offers an important insight into the public opinion of the public education system, and this rise in homeschooling for religious (often fundamentalist) reasons has important implications for the future of a pluralistic (diverse) society.

With the knowledge that many students are homeschooled with the intention of religious instruction, it's important to understand the type of content being taught to this group of students, so that we can understand what the outcomes will be once they leave homeschooling. One large provider of fundamentalist homeschooling curricula is Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), originally used by Christian day schools as an alternative to public education, but is sold to homeschooling parents as self-contained workbooks.¹¹ Much of the content taught by the ACE curriculum is severely lacking in depth and rigor, teaching only simplistic facts and rejecting all other worldviews.¹² It is problematic that students are taught with curriculums like these as they promote narrow and even hateful thinking. One study examined the science modules for their hidden curriculum (what the implicit values being espoused through the content are) and put it best by examining the ACE curriculum as follows, stating *"The language in the fourth edition PACEs [their curriculum's packets] is slightly more temperate, but the conclusion is still clear: those who accept evolution make an immoral choice, and their belief is driven by a determination to sin and to rebel against God. Since the PACEs present evolution as discredited, the implication is that those who believe it are irrational or stupid. The presentation of non-*

¹¹ Dwyer, James G., and Shawn F. Peters. *Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice*. University of Chicago Press, 36 (2019). Chicago Scholarship Online, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226627397.001.0001>.

¹² Scaramanga, J., Reiss, M.J. Evolutionary stasis: creationism, evolution and climate change in the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum. *Cult Stud of Sci Educ* 18, 821 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-023-10187-y>

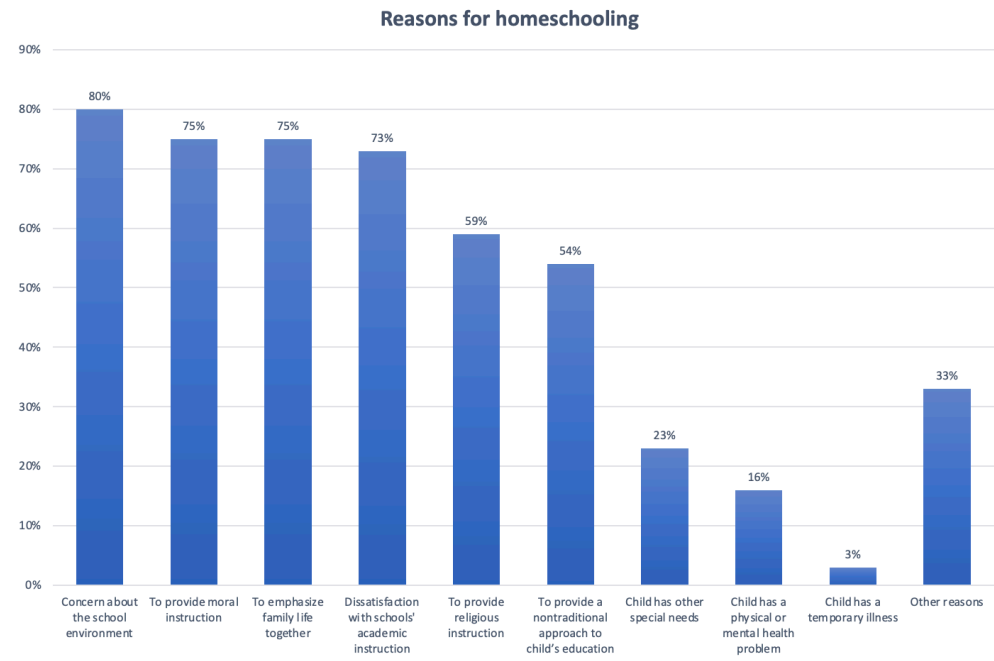
creationists as morally inferior anti-Christians can only promote intolerance and suspicion towards adherents of mainstream science.”¹³

From the reasoning presented by homeschooling parents, we can see that the view that schools are not providing a safe, moral, and enriching environment is spreading, and more parents believe that they can provide a better alternative. At the same time, there are likely a significant number of students being pulled out of school because of a religious and moral mismatch and being educated with fundamentalist curricula which do not prepare them for a world beyond their homeschool environment. In some cases, like with ACE, not only are they failing to be prepared but they are even being harmed by this as these curriculums promote a close-minded view.

Visual 1¹⁴

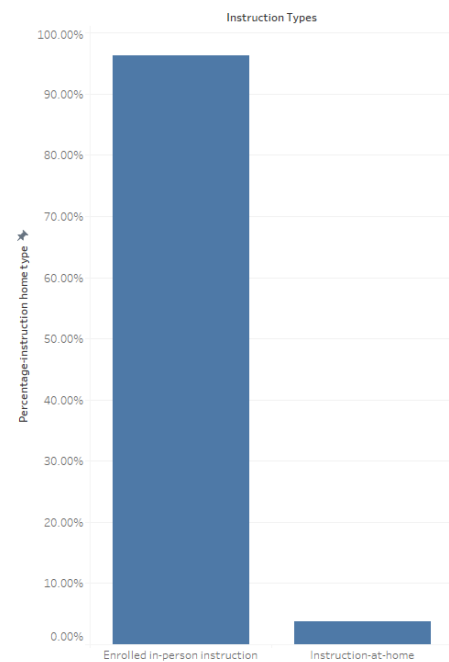
¹³ Ibid, 820.

¹⁴ National Center for Education Statistics. “2019 Homeschooling and Full-Time Virtual Education Rates,” September 11, 2023. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2023101>.

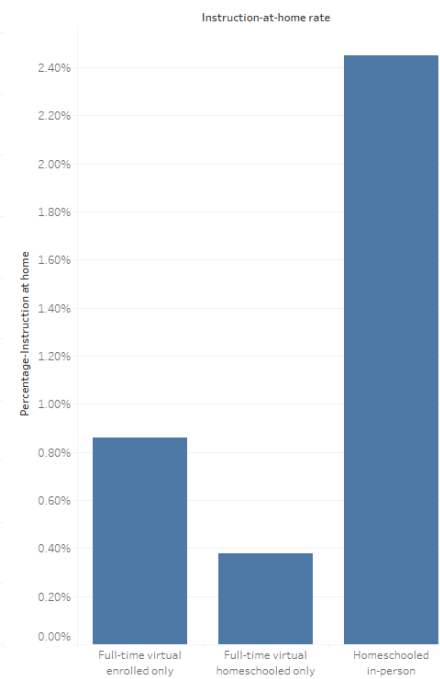


Visual 2¹⁵

Types of instruction surveyed



Breakdown of home education types



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¹⁵ Ibid

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