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Does Homeschooling “Work”? A Critique of the Empirical Claims and Agenda of Advocacy Organizations

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The phenomenal growth of homeschooling in recent years demonstrates not only the appeal of this educational approach but also the notable policy acumen of the homeschooling movement’s leading advocates. This analysis examines and critiques the empirical claims made by homeschooling proponents to justify further expansion and deregulation of the movement, and sheds light on the homeschool advocacy agenda explicit in those claims. Advocates often strongly suggest a causal connection between homeschooling and academic success, postsecondary attainment, and even enjoyment of life. Seemingly, these benefits are experienced all at a reduced cost per student. It is through such claims that homeschooling advocates have expanded the practice of homeschooling and have pressed for fewer state regulations and less oversight. This article outlines and challenges those claims, showing the tenuous basis for such conclusions. Instead, in an era when policymakers demand evidence of effective educational practices, we note the remarkable lack of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of this popular approach and suggest that continued efforts to claim such evidence exists indicates the desire of advocates to further advance what is largely an ideological agenda of deregulation as an end in itself.

The phenomenal growth of homeschooling in recent years demonstrates not only the appeal of this educational approach but also the notable policy acumen of the homeschooling movement’s leading proponents. There is little doubt that families have been drawn to this practice for many valid reasons, but those family decisions to homeschool have largely been encouraged and enabled by influential organizations that highlight the effectiveness and outcomes associated with this approach. In the context of the remarkable increase in the numbers of homeschoolers, as well as the dramatic changes in policies that weigh on homeschooling, the question emerges as to how these changes are supported by evidence of the effectiveness of this educational practice.

Indeed, as homeschooling parents enjoy greater latitude to educate their own children, they can do so largely thanks to the efforts of national-level organizations that have been active in both policy and research circles. A major element of these advocates’ efforts in persuading policymakers and the public of the benefits of this approach has been in brokering evidence that homeschooling works—typically in the area of academic outcomes. One might think that the amazing advances of the movement indicate that there is a strong empirical basis for the

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effectiveness of homeschooling. In this analysis, we review the best evidence nominated by advocates for justifying the further expansion of the movement, a process that advocates hope would happen largely through greater deregulation of homeschooling practices and through the recruitment of more families to join the effort. What we find is a considerable gap between the success of these organizations in growing and deregulating the movement, and empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the homeschooling approach.

Despite this disconnect, there are many good reasons families may choose to homeschool their children. For instance, many parents believe that they can do a better job of teaching their own children than would the local public or private school. The idea of tailoring the curriculum to meet a child’s interests and abilities is quite strong, as is the imperative many parents feel to provide an educational experience immersed in the values they practice at home but do not see in schools. Thus, many parents want to avoid what they see as negative influences and teachings in the wider society, and particularly in public schools. On the other hand, some parents simply disagree with the idea of public schooling, or even formalized schooling, in principle.

Although such justifications may motivate a family to pursue homeschooling, we do not dwell here on these individual family choices. Instead, the focus of this analysis is on the policy aspects of the homeschooling movement—a movement that has successfully advanced primarily on a dual rhetoric of innate parental rights and academically preferable results. We do not dispute here the general rights of individual families to homeschool their children; we are instead interested in the claims of advocacy organizations that homeschooling leads to better outcomes—a promise that may be much more persuasive than a “right” in motivating families and lawmakers to support the growth of the movement.

In the analysis that follows, we highlight basic information on the remarkable advances of this advocacy movement and summarize some of the arguments made by proponents to encourage further growth. Then we dig down beneath the public and policy rhetoric to consider some of the main research findings used to undergird claims about the effectiveness of homeschooling, and the consequent need to expand the movement through greater recruitment and deregulation. Careful examination of the empirical basis for such claims finds them to be often unsubstantiated and methodologically flimsy. In fact, we argue that organizations making such claims are using them as empirical cover, advancing an agenda based on academic effects when the leading organizations in the movement are actually motivated by other ideological issues. In the concluding discussion, we consider some of the political and societal implications of that agenda.

THE APPEAL OF HOMESCHOOLING

The remarkable expansion of the homeschooling movement in the United States has been well documented. In 2008 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated that the United States has 1.5 million homeschooled students, a significant increase from their finding of 1.1 million students in 2003. The National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) recently arrived at an approximation of more than 2 million homeschooled students (Ray, 2010). Such gains suggest the effectiveness and appeal of the approach and/or the political power of the leading advocacy organizations in removing barriers to its growth.

As we have noted, families have various reasons for homeschooling. Quite often, the principal motivation reported by families has been to provide religious or moral instruction; however,

over the years, parents are increasingly committed to homeschooling for other reasons related to perceptions of the public school system, including concerns about the school environment and dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at traditional schools (NCES, 2008). Many parents seek a “safer environment for children and youth, because of physical violence, drugs and alcohol, psychological abuse, and improper and unhealthy sexuality associated with institutional schools” (Ray, 2011). Minority families have also identified racism in the schools as a motivator to homeschool (Mazama & Lundy, 2012).

In light of these myriad motivations, families have hundreds of homeschool support organizations from which they can receive information. Many of these organizations rely upon the research findings provided by national-level advocacy groups to encourage homeschooling. These organizations report that homeschooling almost by its nature leads to better academic outcomes, and there is a logic to such arguments, considering the ideal class size and tailored curriculum, for instance. In general, to offer evidence on the power of the approach, they show that homeschooled students achieve higher academic scores than students in the traditional public schools, or that college students who were homeschooled outperformed college students who had come from public schools.

For example, the Christian Home Educators Association of California (2013) provides parents who are “considering homeschooling” with research commissioned by the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), and conducted by the NHERI that reviews data on academic outcomes and indicates that homeschooling is “getting results.” Elsewhere, HSLDA (2013b) contends that “home schooling works”—a finding based on a large-scale study of more than 20,000 homeschooled students. HSLDA also runs an effort called “You Can Homeschool,” which offers the following information on its home page:¹

- “On average, homeschool students in grades 1–4 perform one grade level higher than their public and private school counterparts.”
- “By grade 8, the average homeschool student performs four grade levels above the national average.” (HSDLA, 2013c, citing Rudner, 1999)

Similarly, the Bob Jones University Press (n.d.), which makes very popular curricular materials for Christian homeschooling families, argued that when parents do not pursue this approach to education, “the education becomes inferior and can produce only an inferior product.”

Although this type of appealing information is provided by these advocacy organizations to persuade parents to homeschool their children, similar evidence is also aimed at policymakers to encourage the further deregulation of the practice, and presumably the further expansion of the movement. As an apt illustration of this, the Heritage Foundation makes a number of arguments from a review of the evidence before recommending that federal and state lawmakers avoid regulation of the practice of homeschooling (Lips & Feinberg, 2008). In summarizing the knowledge on academic outcomes, they noted that the

academic literature on the relationship between homeschooling and academic achievement outcomes is limited, but the largest evaluation of homeschooled students’ academic achievement found that they were doing well in their learning environments. (p. 4)

¹<http://www.youcanhomeschool.org/starthere/default.asp>

The Heritage report then goes on to demonstrate the fiscal benefits for taxpayers from the growing homeschooling movement.

THE PERCEIVED PROMISE AND IMPACT OF HOMESCHOOLING

Many of the efforts to broaden the appeal of homeschooling for parents and policymakers draw from the growing research literature on the practice and the movement that promotes it. Three types of recurring themes appear quite frequently in the claims made on behalf of homeschooling:

1. Academically speaking, homeschooled students will outperform their public school peers, will go further in postsecondary attainment, and will be more civically engaged and happier than non-homeschooled adults;
2. homeschooling can be done cheaper on a per-student basis than what exists in traditional public education; and
3. government regulation and requirements for parent certification are not correlated with better outcomes.

These themes largely define what proponents of homeschooling hold to be the general state of knowledge about homeschooling effects. Moreover, these themes appear to serve as a framework for homeschooling advocacy. Overall, the research cited by homeschooling proponents would suggest that homeschooling "works," especially when compared to traditional public schools (HSLDA, 2013b).

Academic Outcomes, Postsecondary Attainment, and Adult Life

Drawing from the research, homeschooling proponents contend that homeschooled students outperform their public school peers, and by default, that it is the practice of homeschooling that leads to those outcomes. In one example, the HSLDA (2004) cited research showing "homeschooler's composite scores on the basic battery of tests in reading, math, and language arts ranked 18 to 28 percentile points above public school averages." This claim is not limited to test scores in any single year but also includes the notion that homeschoolers outperform their public school peers throughout each grade level at an accelerated rate. Proponents point to data indicating that homeschooled students surpass their public school peers in Grades 1 through 4 and that the achievement gap widens after Grade 5 (HSLDA, n.d., citing Rudner, 1999). This, along with other justifications for homeschooling, serves as an empirical justification that homeschooling works and, in comparison, is better than traditional public education.

Another finding within the pro-homeschooling research is the notion that homeschooling is correlated to higher postsecondary academic achievement. Homeschooling proponents promote research findings that students who were homeschooled acquire more postsecondary degrees than their public school peers. Such research serves as key evidence for many that homeschooling is, in fact, better than public education. According to Ray (2003), 50.2% of homeschoolers had some college but no degree, 8.7% had associates degrees, and 11.8% had bachelor degrees compared to 34%, 4.1%, and 7.6% of the general U.S. public, respectively. The size of the homeschooled

sample was 4,129 (and cannot be considered representative of the general homeschooling population, or of the wider U.S. school population), whereas the sample size for the general U.S. public was 27,312,000.

Advocates also point to research that indicates homeschooled children are more civically engaged than their non-homeschooled peers (Ray, 2003). Stemming from the notion that homeschooling provides a more holistic and individualized curriculum, proponents contend that such practices inform the worldview of homeschooled students, which is then manifested as increased civic engagement. In addition, homeschooling advocates believe that homeschooling will establish the foundation for homeschooled children to have a more joyous life than their non-homeschooled peers (Ray, 2003). These claims of increased civic involvement are based on a study commissioned by HSLDA that compared survey data from homeschooled adults in 2003 to survey data from a national survey conducted 6 years prior (Nolin, Chapman, & Chandler, 1997). The homeschooling survey had an average of 5,254 responses for its items and cannot be considered representative of the nation's population, whereas the national survey had 188,233 and is a much better sampling.

Reduced Costs

A second argument for the expansion of homeschooling is related to the financial costs. Those advocating in favor of homeschooling point to the estimated costs of traditional public education versus the apparently less expensive costs of homeschooling (Ray, 2009). Citing Ray (1999), the NHERI (n.d.) claims that the average homeschooling parent spends \$546 per child per year, whereas public schools spent \$5,325 per student during the 1993–94 school year. Ray (2009) notes that the 2009 average cost per public school student was \$9,963 (p. 4). Accordingly, the overarching theme is to cast traditional public education as a bloated bureaucracy that when partnered with “lower academic outcomes” constitutes wasted tax dollars. What follows, then, is the general conclusion that homeschooling is not only better at producing higher academic achievement but also does so with pennies on the dollar that are not coming from the pockets of taxpayers, to the tune of \$4.4 billion and \$9.9 billion (Lips & Feinberg, 2008). The HSLDA (2004) stated that “the message is loud and clear. More money does not mean a better education.”

Deregulation as Unnecessary and Intrusive

Finally, a consistent theme within the research summaries offered by advocates of homeschooling is the notion that government regulation, including certification of parent-teachers, is (a) unnecessary and thus unwarranted, and (b) an attempt to strip parents of their rights to dictate the type of education their children receive. Citing research showing no correlation of certification to higher academic outcomes (HSLDA, 2004; Ray, 2009, 2011), proponents of homeschooling contend that state-mandated certification requirements are an unnecessary burden. Moreover, state and federal attempts to further regulate homeschooling are seen as an unwelcomed intrusion. In fact, citing Ray (1999), the HSLDA (2004) succinctly concludes that “homeschool freedom works. Homeschoolers have earned the right to be left alone.”

In all, these overarching themes within the research supporting the continuation and expansion of homeschooling both reflect and inform the beliefs that proponents hold about homeschooling.

Given the research, advocates indicate that they know homeschooling is working, that attempts to further regulate homeschooling are unwarranted and unjustified, and that when compared to public education, homeschooled students outperform their peers academically and socially.

EMPIRICAL LIMITATIONS TO THOSE CLAIMS

Although homeschooling advocates and allied lawmakers push for policies aligned with the aforementioned conclusions, further investigation reveals that the empirical basis for many of the most profound claims is remarkably questionable. In fact, claims in the areas of (a) outcomes and effects of homeschooling, (b) fiscal advantages to homeschooling, and (c) the benefits of further deregulation are all, on closer inspection, quite problematic.

Claims on Effects

First, probably the most important claim made by and for homeschoolers is that the approach “works,” is “effective,” or “gets results” because it “likely leads to” certain desirable outcomes such as enhancing academic effectiveness, promoting greater civic engagement, increasing participation and success in higher education, and enriching later life and job satisfaction (HSLDA, 2013b; Lips & Feinberg, 2008; Ray, 2009). The focus on academic achievement in particular is a critical issue because hopes of improving the educational experiences and future life opportunities of homeschooled students depend on evidence that the treatment is more effective than other alternatives. It is thus a key argument for expanding the homeschooling movement, as proponents of homeschooling believe it will both help individual students as well as boost the educational productivity of the country in an era of international economic competitiveness. Similarly, other claims about the impact of homeschooling on success in higher education, enriched civic engagement, and future life outcomes are also useful for supporting policies that can further expand the movement.

Any such claims about the effects of homeschooling on desirable outcomes are undercut, however, by basic empirical imperatives. Although there is little dispute that homeschooling children typically attain higher test scores on average, the question is whether homeschooling *causes* better achievement (or engagement, or higher education participation, etc.). Outcomes such as increased achievement and engagement may simply be a reflection of the advantages that homeschooling families typically bring to their children—advantages that would make it likely that these students would succeed academically and in life even if they were educated in schools.

For instance, according to research results produced by proponents, homeschooled children “score above national averages on standardized achievement tests” (Ray, 2000, p. 74). However, although advocates suggest that above-average test scores demonstrate the success of homeschooling, what is known is that the most important factors influencing student performance rests on socioeconomic predispositions like family income, parental educational attainment, and so on (Coleman et al., 1966; Sacks, 2007; Wrigley, 2011). Accordingly, although there may be a correlation between the act of homeschooling and higher academic outcomes, researchers, and advocates have yet to demonstrate a causal relationship between these two factors. What is more likely is that those parents who choose to homeschool are more invested in the educational

outcomes of their children, can afford supplemental materials, have the financial flexibility and benefits to forgo a secondary income, and have higher educational attainment—factors that we know are true of the homeschooling population (Ray, 2010). These factors are likely the explanation for higher test scores rather than the practice of homeschooling itself. That being said, high-achieving students who are homeschooled might very well still reap the benefits of their socioeconomic advantages if they were enrolled in a public school. It follows that the children of parents who homeschool could fare at least as well in public school as they do in the private realm of the home.

Perhaps the best way to test for any causal relationship of homeschooling on these outcomes would be to conduct randomized trials that naturally account for the influence of confounding factors. Yet, by definition, homeschooling families are those that are motivated to self-select into the “treatment” group, making it virtually impossible to construct a useful comparison group with the same attributes and motivations, thereby undercutting the possibility of identifying homeschooling as the causal mechanism in improving outcomes. Alternatively, in trying to isolate the impact of homeschooling itself, researchers could attempt to control for all the other factors known to influence academic outcomes. However, researchers can more easily control for observable factors in comparing groups and treatments; they face significant obstacles with unobservable factors like motivation, initiative, and commitment to education—extremely important predictors of academic success that are known to be well represented in the homeschooling community. Therefore, any attempts to discern the impact of homeschooling are extremely limited, if not fatally flawed.

Nevertheless, homeschooling proponents often point to surveys such as the report from Rudner (1999) in claiming that higher scores for homeschoolers show the effectiveness of the approach. Yet this is akin to arguing that dentists are more effective than emergency room physicians because they see lower mortality rates. The population represented in the sample in the Rudner study is qualitatively different than the larger population to which they were compared, making causal claims unsupported, as even Rudner noted. In fact, the study drew on a sample of homeschoolers using a testing service offered by a conservative Christian university. Not only is such a sample not representative of the wider homeschooling population (as the author acknowledged), but—even if we were able to overcome the obstacles of controlling for unobservable factors with survey data—it is virtually impossible to construct a sample that is representative of the wider population. This is because basic information about the size and nature of the population that homeschools their children in the United States (an essential prerequisite for making general claims about the treatment) is unknowable due to the substantial degree of under- and nonreporting associated with the movement.

Consequently, efforts to encourage policymakers to expand the homeschooling movement based on claims of the effectiveness of this approach are on extremely tenuous empirical ground. The research used to advocate for such an expansion does not and cannot support claims made regarding the effectiveness of homeschooling as a treatment. In fact, even some of the correlative research produced by homeschooling proponents suggests that it is not the act of homeschooling itself, but instead being the type of family that is interested in homeschooling, that is more closely associated with better outcomes. For instance, NHERI found that there were no statistically significant differences between students who spent varying years being homeschooled, nor any substantial differences in outcomes—less than .5% of the variance—based on the specific approaches used by homeschooling families (Ray, 2009). If there are no significant academic

achievement differences between a student who spent his or her entire life being homeschooled and one who spent less, or between homeschooled students subjected to various pedagogical approaches, it would appear that what causes high academic achievement is not homeschooling per se, but the predispositions that most homeschooling families share. Further, it is shown that what causes the largest disparity between scores of homeschooled students are parental education levels, which is also true in the regular schooled population.

In the realm of higher education, Saunders (2009) showed that homeschooled students displayed higher rates of persistence into their sophomore years. However, given that most homeschooled students come from homes with parents holding college degrees, a support structure within those families that aids homeschooled children as they matriculate and persist through college is more likely to be present than in the general population. It very well may be good role models—not homeschooling—that serve as an asset to these students. Thus, rather than encouraging the act of homeschooling, policymakers would be on firmer empirical ground by encouraging all families to be more like homeschooling families: to be highly interested and invested in the education of their children.

Claims on Efficiencies

A second, purportedly research-based claim made about homeschooling deals with the movement's potential cost-saving features and improved efficiencies. Regarding the former, advocates note that homeschooling families pay taxes for public education but do not themselves take advantages of those services, thus providing a financial boon for districts. Furthermore, on the latter issue, they make the argument that homeschooling is more effective by measuring the costs of education in public schools relative to homes, particularly in light of perceived academic outcomes (Ray, 2009). In both of these instances, public schooling is seen as an inefficient alternative to homeschooling because it takes and uses more resources than necessary. Precisely for that reason, such claims can be important in policy discussions because they position homeschooling as a more efficient and effective policy option that should be encouraged and expanded.

As we have shown, such claims appear in the research of advocacy organizations promoting homeschooling. Although there is certainly some truth to the claim that districts are collecting money to educate students who will never set foot in their hallways (as is also true in the case of students attending private schools), the implicit and overt basis of these claims is not as strong as it may initially seem. In fact, many of these arguments break down on closer inspection. For instance, claims on expenditures often rely on inappropriate apples-to-oranges comparisons. Citing Ray (2009), the HSLDA indicates that public school students perform well below the level of homeschooled students, despite the fact that \$9,963 is spent on the public school students compared to a median of about \$400 to \$599 for homeschooled students. Consistent with its insistence that government-run entities are inherently wasteful, the Heritage Foundation claims that homeschooling saves an average of \$4.4 billion to \$9.9 billion annually (Lips & Feinberg, 2008). These savings, according to the Heritage Foundation, can "be saved or reallocated to other uses" (Lips & Feinberg, 2008). This notion, partnered with claims of higher academic achievement, constitutes a claim of financial and academic efficiency.

But such simplistic comparisons neglect basic social science tenets by comparing one population or process to another despite ignoring well-documented differences between the two groups

and the inputs to the productive processes, including family income and education, special education costs, and so forth. Furthermore, these claims appear to ignore the substantial costs of homeschooling to the families that admirably shoulder these burdens, including overhead costs factored into the public school figure, as well as opportunity costs of adults foregoing paid employment or career advancement.

Indeed, the basic claim of efficiency advantages is fundamentally flawed. Efficiency is a question of the ratio of inputs to outcomes, with greater efficiency being a matter of increasing outcomes while holding inputs constant and/or reducing inputs while outcomes do not decline. Yet, despite the appeal of homeschooling for its appearance of getting great academic outcomes with relatively minimal inputs, in fact, neither side of that equation is or can be appropriately specified. As we discussed in the previous section, researchers have yet to demonstrate the actual outcomes of homeschooling itself (controlling for other confounding factors). Furthermore, studies have yet to appropriately account for the inputs necessary for homeschooling, partly because so many of the factors going into any educational effort—motivation, experience, commitment, and so on—are nearly impossible to quantify. Moreover, the collective benefits typically associated with public education, such as increased social tolerance and cohesion, enhanced social capital and economic productivity, reduced fertility, and crime, are also difficult to quantify as direct outcomes of the endeavor.

Yet, even if we accept the unsupported claim that homeschooling embodies efficiencies, it does not then follow that policies encouraging more families to homeschool will result in better circumstances for students remaining in public schools, even if fewer students are then using the resources devoted to public education. The transfer of one child from public school to homeschooling would typically have an insignificant impact on costs to a school or district, and does not really represent any savings because the school would typically still need the same number of teachers, a principal, budget for overhead, and so on.

In fact, to effect significant cost savings for public schools, a critical mass of families—enough to merit reduction in teaching staff, for instance—would have to leave a particular school or district, and its budget would have to remain the same (i.e., the school or district's budget allocation is not determined on a per-pupil basis). Thus, even though the homeschooling movement is substantial across the country, only where it reaches this critical mass in specific localities could it potentially result in real budget savings, at least according to the logic suggested by advocates. However, if such a dramatic shift in student population were to occur, it could represent not only potential savings but also serious threats to those remaining in the schools. The loss of a substantial number of students may mean the loss of political support for local funding of public schools. Furthermore, the exit from public schools of a mass of educated, active families with an interest in education is likely to have detrimental impacts on the school community through a degraded peer effect (on the peer effect, see Epple & Romano, 1998; Hanushek, Markman, Kain, & Rivkin, 2003; Hoxby, 2000; Lubienski, 2003).

A notable irony in all of this is that, even as advocates claim that there are cost savings to the public education system, they are advancing proposals to cut into those supposed savings to encourage the further expansion of homeschooling. For instance, the Heritage Foundation advocates for the expansion of educational tax credits and deductions for homeschooling expenses for families, as well as state tax incentives for other parties that contribute to a child's tax-free education savings account (Lips & Feinberg, 2008).

Claims for Deregulation

Finally, a problematic claim made regarding homeschooling is that further deregulation of the movement is necessary, presumably to improve opportunities and outcomes for more students. This claim is derived from observations about the relative performance of students taught by formally trained or untrained educators but is also situated within the context of homeschooling proponents' general aversion on the part of leading homeschooling groups to almost any regulation or oversight. Consequently, this type of claim is used to support policies that further reduce public responsibility and involvement in education for homeschooling families. Current and recent proposals seek to accelerate and extend this trend by removing the requirement that parents educating their children at home have a teacher certification or even a college degree, and restricting state oversight of homeschooling, as with the reduction or eradication of mandatory testing for homeschooled children.

These calls are based on a number of assertions from homeschooling advocacy research, particularly the claim that parents with teacher certification are not more effective than noncertified parents (Ray, 2009), or that certification does not have a significant benefit for education in general. This issue of rolling back state requirements that homeschooling parents need to be certified came to the fore when a court ruling in California unexpectedly (and temporarily) upheld such a requirement (Egelko & Tucker, 2008; Home School Legal Defense Association, 2008). Consequently, advocacy groups like the HSLDA point to survey data indicating that students whose parents were not certified actually scored higher on standardized tests, arguing that “critics of home-schooling have long insisted that parents who want to teach their own children should become certified teachers first,” yet their study “found that whether or not parents were teacher-certified had no impact on these high scores” (Ray, 2009; see also Ray, 2010).

Such conclusions with regard to homeschooling are quite dubious. Again, available data and analyses are not able to support the claims made by these organizations. Survey data are not suited to making claims regarding a causal link, or lack thereof, between parents' teacher certification status and the academic outcomes of their children. In this same vein, there has been a vigorous debate in research circles over the years about the degree to which teacher certification matters not only in homeschooling settings but in public education as well (e.g., Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thoreson, 2001; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Moe, 2005; Walsh, 2001). Although much of the research has been mixed and contested, a recent large-scale study found that teacher certification was a significant predictor of achievement in school settings (Lubienski & Lubienski, 2013). Whether or not teacher certification is a significant predictor of achievement in home education settings has not been established in the empirical literature, and analyses of survey data simply have not examined the issue with any rigor; however, as we noted earlier, there is reason to think that the socioeconomic and unmeasurable motivational advantage of homeschool families often make up for or mask any deficiencies in pedagogical training (a secondary factor even in school settings) and that further expansion of the homeschooling movement could draw in families where these advantages are not as pronounced, thus diminishing the primacy of family background and enhancing the potential impact of formal training.

EXPLORING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN RESEARCH EVIDENCE AND POLICY ADVOCACY

In an era of school reform characterized by demands for scientifically based interventions, the curious case of homeschooling stands out for its lack of grounding in any sound empirical evidence. Facilitated by policymakers' efforts to lessen restrictions on its growth, and despite a notable dearth of empirical evidence on its effectiveness, the homeschooling movement has grown by leaps and bounds, even as policymakers require research-based practices, and private funders pursue "effective philanthropy" that shows evidence of the impact of the programs they support. We do not intend to take a stand at this point regarding the overall desirability of homeschooling, nor on specific issues such as the requirement for parents to have a teaching degree. Instead, we simply want to point out the tenuous empirical basis for many claims made to advance the homeschooling movement.

Considering the state of the data available, it is simply not possible to claim that homeschooling "works" and "leads to" desirable outcomes. Those claims might be true but cannot be supported by analyses of extant empirical evidence. Indeed, homeschooling advocates are on much firmer footing simply arguing for greater deregulation and expansion based on other grounds, such as the demonstrable satisfaction of many of those engaging in the practice, or the moral or legal argument that parents have a substantial right to control the education of their children. Still, leading proponents persist in trying to prove the academic impacts of this approach. We contend that this is because evidence of impact is quite persuasive in policymaking arenas that have been so focused on academic effectiveness as evidenced by standardized test scores and that advocates see this as a key element of their efforts to expand and further deregulate the practice.

Despite advocacy organizations clamoring for more change, homeschooling has already been substantially deregulated over the last few decades in the United States, with fewer barriers, restrictions, and points of public accountability. However, we are not aware of any compelling evidence that deregulation to this point has improved the effectiveness of the practice. Indeed, in lieu of any firm evidence that the homeschooling "treatment"—as opposed to home factors—is at all effective, it is far from clear that expanding the movement will increase its impact. In fact, as the practice is likely further expanded due to deregulation, it could be that results will diminish as families with characteristics that are more marginally associated with academic success join the movement.

Although they are often dressed up in a scientific rhetoric of performative measures and results, it appears that calls for further deregulation of homeschooling may be ideological rather than empirical imperative. Rather than showing a strong empirical basis to justify the expansion of homeschooling, the evidence indicates that the movement is growing for other reasons and that empirical claims of its effectiveness are just a very useful marketing mechanism.

The Advocacy Agenda

Of course, calls for further deregulation of homeschooling are taking place in an atmosphere of antigovernment advocacy. Although there are often good justifications for limiting state intrusions in the private sphere, proponents of many efforts to roll back the reach of the government

frequently see this as an end in itself, regardless of the actual evidence on the effectiveness of public institutions or their proposed alternatives. Of interest, even as some proponents seek to reduce the government role in education by further deregulating and encouraging homeschooling, they also seek state subsidies to entice families into joining their anti-state agenda (e.g., Lips & Feinberg, 2008).

There has probably been no organization with more success in advocating for homeschooling than the HSLDA. The group has been pushing for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution as well as for state legislation that would affirm parents’ basic legal right to control and direct the education of their children. HSDLA contends that

the Parental Rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution would ensure that parents have a fundamental right to raise, educate, and care for their children. The amendment would also prevent treaties from overruling U.S. law regarding parents and children, such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. (see HSLDA, 2012a, 2012d)

HSLDA actively monitors state and federal legislative proposals and is very effective in mobilizing opposition to any bills it believes could even remotely represent the possibility of impacting the rights of homeschooling parents. For instance, it was famously instrumental in defeating the ratification of an international treaty—based on U.S. law—designed to secure the rights of disabled children because the proposed legal standard of the “best interests of the child” could, according to HSLDA’s interpretation, “override the traditional fundamental right of parents to direct the education and upbringing of their child with special needs” (Estrada, 2012b). HSLDA (2011, 2012b) has also opposed numerous legislative actions that proposed to change child abuse reporting standards. Such actions would require all adults to report child abuse. Among the concerns raised by HSLDA are that such moves will allow for an increase in baseless child abuse reports, and some of the proposals allow investigations without evidence of abuse.

In addition, the HSLDA (2012c, 2013a) has been very active in opposing legislation to increase the compulsory school age because that would expand government control over education. The group responded to President Obama’s 2012 declaration that states should require all children to stay in school until they graduate or turn 18 by noting that

if there were a federal mandate (either passed by Congress or through regulations) that required the states to keep students in school until they graduate or turn age 18, this could lead to a federal definition of what constitutes “graduation from high school.” Once the federal government creates federal guidelines or definitions in this area, additional and harmful federal regulations on homeschoolers could easily follow. (Estrada, 2012a)

Such strident and preemptive advocacy for this agenda bears similarities to the successful strategies of the National Rifle Association in promoting its interpretation of the Second Amendment in response to any perceived threat to those rights. In these cases, an abstract principle is elevated to a pure, if extreme, interpretation of rights regardless of the real-world consequences.

CONCLUSION

In this analysis we have offered a critique of the empirical arguments made by and for the homeschooling movement. Rather than a critique of homeschooling per se, we have demonstrated

that there is essentially no scientific evidence on the effectiveness of homeschooling. This is not to say that the practice is not effective, particularly in every case, but only that multiple research attempts have not yet proven its effectiveness. Despite massive increases in the scale of the practice, moves to further expand and deregulate homeschooling are not supported by empirical evidence.

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