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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes whether certain events in society influence educational choice, in particular, the choice to home school children. Using an epidemiological approach, the article analyzes the perceptions of home-school leaders and others involved in the movement, focusing on the substantive influence of events on the home-schooling movement. It discusses how well-publicized incidents of violence in schools and the poor academic performance of public schools serve to push students away from the public school system. It asks whether these repellent characteristics necessarily translate into an increase in the number of those who are home schooled. It then presents stories and circumstances that have portrayed home schooling in a positive light and asks if such exposure also leads to an increase in the number of home-schooled children. The text cites various stories that reflect an increase in the number of home-schooled students following tragic events in schools, particularly the Columbine High School shooting in Colorado, and how concerns over safety prompt parents to opt for home schooling. The paper concludes that the positive pull of home schooling, combined with the negative push of public schools, has increased the number of those who are home schooled. (Contains 30 references.) (RJM)

The "Push and Pull" of Home Schooling in the Larger Society: Using an Epidemiological Lens to Study an Educational Phenomenon

Presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association,
New Orleans, April 26, 2000

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Introduction

April 20, 1999 - Two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, shoot 12 students and a teacher to death, wound 23 others, and then kill themselves.

May 26, 1999 - David Beihl, a 13-year-old home school student from Saluda, South Carolina, became the 1999 National Geography Bee champion. The competition was held in Washington, DC; and was hosted by Alex Trebek (of *Jeopardy* fame).

What, one may reasonably ask, do the above-cited events have in common?

Simply, they are both events which (a) attracted national media attention, (b) affected the home schooling movement, and (c) are illustrative of the epidemiological lens used in this paper to analyze events impacting educational choice.

What, one might then ask, is an epidemiological lens, and what place does it have in an educational discussion? This is a logical question which begs an appropriately detailed answer. Let us begin, then, with a thorough definition of "epidemiology," a medical term of no little complexity.

What is Epidemiology?

According to Hennekens and Buring (1987),

Epidemiology may be viewed as based on two fundamental assumptions: first, that human disease does not occur at random, and second, that human disease has causal and preventive factors that can be identified through systematic investigation of different populations and subgroups of individuals within a population in different places or at different times. (p. 3)

All well and good. But how does this apply to education? Hennekens and Buring continue their discussion, noting that "there is a natural progression in epidemiological reasoning. The process begins with a suspicion concerning the possible influence of a particular factor on the occurrence of disease" (1987, p. 3). I would argue that this same medical framework could be applied to the field of education, in looking at "the possible influence of a particular factor on the occurrence of educational choice."

Perhaps the definition offered by Hippocrates, considered by many to be the father of modern medicine, will make the point even clearer. Apparently, Hippocrates was "the

first to record the concept that the development of illness in humans might be related to external factors in the environment as well as the internal composition of the individual" (Harkness, 1995, p. 5). In similar fashion, the process of educational choice might be related to external factors in the environment, as well as the internal belief system of the individual. Do certain events in the environment (i.e., the larger society) actually affect educational choice, in particular, the choice to home school children?

It is my purpose in this paper to address this very question, albeit in an admittedly limited manner, by (a) exploring appropriate events—both positive and negative—in terms of their potential to impact educational choice; (b) examining the perceptions of home school leaders and others involved in the movement as to the effect of these events, and, finally; (c) considering the actual, substantive influence of these events on the home schooling movement. First, a detailed look at the circumstances in question.

Using an Epidemiological Lens: Examining the Push and Pull

Looking through an epidemiological lens, certain incidents occurring within the realm of public scrutiny may be seen to either "push" parental choice toward a decision to home school, or "pull" them toward it. Given the more negative association of a "push," those events which may be seen as negative in nature will be categorized as such, while those events which are more positive in nature will be categorized as a "pull." The Columbine school shooting noted earlier is, for example, a prime example of a "push," while the home schooled student winning a geography bee is more appropriately a "pull."

The Push

Violence in the schools. Clearly, the horrific events at Columbine constituted a major push *away* from the public schools. The massive media coverage, which has

abated somewhat as of this writing, continues still, as do the effects of the tragedy. Articles concerning the shooting still appear in major publications. In its November 8, 1999 issue, People Magazine included an article entitled "The Shots Still Echo: The Columbine Tragedy Claims Another Victim" (Staff, 1999a); the blurb for the article noted that "the suicide of Carla Hochhalter, whose daughter was wounded at Columbine, underscores the lingering pain of school shootings" (p. 4).

To be sure, the following shootings at public schools also garnered national attention:

- February 29, 2000 - A 6-year-old first-grade student was fatally shot by another 6-year-old classmate at Buell Elementary School in Flint, Mich. The accused shooter had already been suspended from school three times for fighting, and was scheduled to begin therapy for "anger management" in a week or two. (Newsweek, 2000)
- December 6, 1999 - A 13-year-old student at Fort Gibson Middle School in Fort Gibson, Okla, wounded four classmates and was still trying to pull the trigger on an empty gun when he was subdued by a science teacher, authorities said. He said "I don't know" when asked why he did it.
- April 20, 1999 - Two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, shoot 12 students and a teacher to death, wound 23 others, and then kill themselves.
- May 20, 1999 - A 15-year-old boy at Heritage High School in Conyers, Ga., opened fire with a .357 Magnum and a rifle on a commons area, wounding six students. He was charged with aggravated assault and other felonies. A judge order him tried in adult court. His lawyers are appealing.
- May 21, 1998 - Two teenagers were killed and more than 20 people hurt when a teenage boy allegedly opened fire at high school in Springfield, Ore., after killing his parents at home. Kip Kinkel, 17, was sentenced to nearly 112 years in prison.
- May 19, 1998 - Three days before his graduation, an 18-year-old honor student opened fire in a parking lot at high school in Fayetteville, Tenn., killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend. Jacob Davis has been sentenced to life in prison.
- April 24, 1998 - A science teacher was shot to death in front of students at an eighth-grade dance at the banquet hall in Edinboro, Pa. Andrew Wurst, 15, pleaded guilty to third-degree murder and other charges in September and is serving 30 to 60 years in prison.

- March 24, 1998 - Four girls and a teacher were shot to death and 10 people wounded during a false fire alarm at a middle school in Jonesboro, Ark., when two boys, 11 and 13, fired from the woods. Police did not suggest a motive. Both boys were convicted of murder and can be held up to age 21.
- Dec. 1, 1997 - Three students were killed and five others wounded in a hallway at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky. One girl is left paralyzed. A 14-year-old student pleaded guilty but mentally ill to murder and is serving life in prison. When asked why he did it, he said he didn't know.
- Oct 1, 1997 - A 16-year-old boy in Pearl, Miss., was accused of killing his mother, then going to his high school and shooting nine students, two fatally. He was sentenced to life in prison. The alleged mastermind of the attack awaits trial. Authorities have said the teens were in a cultlike group. (Associated Press, 1999a).

Given the extensive press coverage these shooting received, I have no doubt that the vast majority of Americans are all too familiar with the details of each. It is important, however, to consider the sheer number of these occurrences, and the cumulative effect such news could have on parents with school-aged children.

Indeed, reaction to these events in the larger society was both swift and extensive. The USA Weekend Magazine of August 20-22, 1999, featured a young boy and girl, plaintively facing the camera, with the legend reading "Back to School: Can We Keep Them Safe?" The title of the article itself reinforced this point, as it notes that "The safety of America's school children is today's top concern as they prepare for a new school year. Here's what parents can do to ensure it" (De Becker, 1999, pp. 6-7). The article continues with some common-sense pointers for avoiding violent situations in schools.

The internet is also full of information to assuage the fears of anxious parents, including a "Checklist of Characteristics of Youth Who Have Caused School-Associated Violent Deaths" from the National School Safety Center (1999); "Stopping School Violence: Watch for Signs" (National Crime Prevention Council, 1999); "Violence in Our Schools: Advice For You Parents" (Scholastic, 1999); "Factors Contributing to School

Violence" (1999); "Anticipating Violence: Are Profiles of Students the Answer?" (Dallas Morning News, 1999); and "Characteristics of Serious or Chronic Juvenile Offenders" (Burbach, 1999). Such lists and "facts" about past student perpetrators of violence can help parents regain a sense of control over their children's safety and well being in schools. Students who are isolated, anti-social, moody, depressed, or involved with gangs – these are the students to "watch out" for, right? Not necessarily. Two of the latest acts of violence (again, as of this writing) involved students who – given their extreme youth (the 6-year-old in Flint, MI) and/or personality types – were hardly likely to have aroused suspicion even in the mind of the most wary parent. Indeed, the 13-year-old shooter in Oklahoma, by all accounts, "had a lot of friends," "was a straight-A student," "belonged to a teen Christian group and other organizations," and "was quite popular" (Associated Press, 1999b). When the students involved in violence do not fit the expected mold, any fragile sense of control parents may have had can vanish, leaving them asking, again, "What can we do to protect our children?" The question continues.

The poor academic performance of public schools. To be sure, violence isn't the only push parents experience that may lead them *away* from the public schools and *toward* home schooling. The public is also unhappily aware of the scholastic problems existing in the nation's public schools -- the fact that they are at best mediocre and at worst, substandard, as concerns their overall academic performance. As it is not the purpose of this paper to detail and discuss in any depth the current scholastic condition of our nation's public schools, only a few of the most recent findings are detailed below.

Just in case the public missed Education Week's (2000) report – "Quality Counts: 2000" -- concerning the "grade" assigned each state for their educational systems, the media was more than happy to trumpet the fact that "schools aren't making the grade"

(News Channel 5, 2000). This was no real news to the public, however, as the survey conducted by the "Public Agenda" (2000) revealed. Apparently, there are "no gold stars for the status quo" and "public frustration runs high, especially when it comes to school management and slowness of reform." Indeed, according to the survey, only 19% of respondents believed that public schools provided a better education than private schools, while 82% of respondents also believed that the problems facing the nation's public schools were widespread.

The latest "Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools" (2000) is particularly telling. Apparently, 18% of respondents assigned the "nation's schools an A or a B, down from 22% in 1997." More specifically, respondents to this 1998 survey awarded grades to the nation's schools as follows: A & B = 18%; A = 1%; B = 17%; C = 49%; D = 15%; Fail = 5%; and "Don't know" = 13%. Hardly a ringing endorsement for the nation's public schools.

Most embarrassing, perhaps, is how our public school students compare nationally. The Center for Educational Reform (1998) believes that

the data are compelling. We learned just last month that American 12th graders scored near the bottom on the recent Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS): U.S. students placed 19th out of 21 nations in math and 16th out of 21 in science. Our advanced students did even worse, scoring dead last in physics. This evidence suggests that, compared to the rest of the industrialized world, our students lag seriously in critical subjects vital to our future. That's a national shame.

This unhappy combination of poor academic performance and the threat of violence in the schools is a highly negative mix, and –as a result – a fairly powerful push *away* from the public school system. But does it necessary push *toward* home schooling as an educational alternative? The answer to this question may lie in an examination of the elements constituting the pull of home schooling, as detailed in the following section.

The Pull

What incidents occur in the larger society that could pull people *toward* home schooling as an educational alternative? Clearly, those events involving home schoolers which garner a fair amount of positive media publicity would qualify. As some of the media releases from the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) indicate, there are an increasing number of such occurrences:

- In this year's (1999) Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee, 19 of 247 contestants were home school students.
- Last year's (1998) spelling bee champion was home schooler Rebecca Sealfon of Brooklyn, New York. Sealfon was the first home schooler to win the annual Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee.
- Chris Mayernik, as 12-year-old home school student from Fairfax, Virginia, won the 1998 Lego Deep Sea Challenge build-a-thon in April.
- Two home schoolers finished in the top 10 for the 1998 Geography Bee, sponsored by the National Geographic Society and Sylvan Learning Centers. J.B. Kizer, of Ohio, who won second place in the National Geography Bee, also competed in this year's Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee. Kizer also appeared on NBC's "Today Show" on May 21, the day after the Geography Bee. (HSLDA, 2000)

As was also noted in the introduction, David Beihl, a 13-year-old home school student from Saluda, South Carolina, became the 1999 National Geography Bee champion. The final round of the geography bee was broadcast on PBS stations later that same week (HSLDA,1999). The "Homeschool Channel"(1999) proudly trumpeted the fact that "Zach and Naomi Prendergast, home schooling parents of 12, made the news recently by being named the Parents' of the Year for National Parents' Day." Such events as these -- while not earthshaking in their impact -- do garner appropriate and highly positive newspaper and television coverage.

Some national publications also play a constructive role in spreading a positive home school message. For instance, home schooling was the cover story of the October 5, 1998, issue of Newsweek. Featuring a picture of pretty, smiling young girl, the side

legend read: "More than a million kids and growing: Can it work for your family?" The featured story itself, "Learning at Home: Does It Pass the Test?" (Kantrowitz & Wingert, 1998) was largely positive.

Other various incidents also brought home schooling into the public's view. The popularity of the teen musical group "Hanson" (made up of three homeschooled brothers), for example, served to bring this educational alternative even more into the mainstream of American culture. Additionally, the results of the largest (to date) independent study ever conducted on home schooling indicated that "in the drive for scholastic excellence, the typical home school student does exceptionally well at every grade level" (Farris, 1999a).

This study, entitled "Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998," was funded by the HSLDA and conducted by Lawrence W. Rudner (1999), director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation at the University of Maryland. Among its many highly positive findings was the fact that

young home school students test one grade level ahead of their counterparts in public and private schools. As they progress, the study shows that home schoolers pull further away from the pack, typically testing four grade levels above the national average by the eighth grade. (Farris, 1999a)

The results of this study made for some very positive headlines around the country, as in WorldNetDaily's "New Evidence Supports Home Schooling: Students Perform Better Than Those in Classroom" (Archer, 1999); Deseret News' "Home Schoolers are Making the Grade, National Study Says" (Toomer-Cooke, 1999); and The Salt Lake Tribune's "Tests Prove There's No Place Like Home for Schooling" (Staff, 1999b), to name a few.

The publicity generated by such headlines is positive indeed. But is all the favorable attention home schooling has received in the media a strong enough factor to actually pull and/or influence members of the larger society toward it as their educational choice? Does the combination of highly negative factors in the public

schools (e.g., school violence, poor academics) and positive ones in the home schooling movement (e.g., safety, strong academics) actively and directly result in a decision to home school? Some of those involved most intimately with the home schooling movement offered their own insights and opinions as concerns this very question; their perceptions are detailed in the following section.

The Impact of Major Events: Some Insights From Home Schooling Leaders, Practitioners, and Others

Specifically, the home school leaders and others cited in this paper assessed the impact of major events – especially and particularly the Columbine tragedy and other acts of school violence – on the home schooling population.¹ Those offering their opinions include Kevin Swanson (Executive Director of Christian Home Educators of Colorado), Brian Ray (President, National Home Education Research Institute), Tom Lewis (President of the Arizona Families for Home Education Association), Elizabeth Lockwood (Sales and Marketing Director for Critical Thinking Skills Press, Inc.), and Laurie Britt (a home school parent and sales representative for Critical Thinking Skills Press, Inc.). Also offering their opinions on this subject, albeit through commentaries and articles, are Wendy Bush (1999), Michael Farris, (1999b), and Lynn Schnaiberg (1999); it is the thoughts of this last group that we will consider first.

Articles and Commentaries

In “School Shootings Impact Homeschoolers,” Wendy Bush (1999) asked questions which echo those driving this paper. Particularly she asked, “How were homeschool families affected by these incidents [school shootings]? . . . Did the school violence increase community interest in homeschooling?”

¹It should not be surprising, perhaps, given the massive and overwhelming national media coverage attending the Columbine tragedy, that conversations concerning the impact of major events almost invariably turned toward and focused upon this particular episode of school violence.

One of the home schooling parents Ms. Bush interviewed noted that "it would have been easy to talk everyone in the world into homeschooling then [after the school violence]. We did have an increase in interest, but it was more out of fear than conviction." A second home schooling parent pointed out that "there's definitely an increase in people asking questions. A lot who asked me [about home schooling] are people who would not have asked before the shooting. It caused a lot of questions to be asked."

One of the parents asserted that "the impact of the shooting [was] noticeable in our group's numbers. We've seen an increase in the area . . . for people who were hanging in indecision, it made them see, 'Yes, we need to [homeschool].'" This same parent allowed, however, that she "didn't expect the tragedy to change too many minds." Some home schooling parents agreed with this last statement, noting that they "saw little interest in home schooling as a result of the incident." In concluding, Ms. Bush points out that "one effect expressed by a number of families is that many home schoolers are more determined than ever to pursue their children's education outside of the public school setting,"

In the title of her article, "Home Schooling Queries Spike After Shootings," Schnaiberg, (1999) sums up the content of it. She quotes one home schooling mother as saying, "The minute something happens that's in the news, my phone calls double because of that reaction." Schnaiberg notes that "whether those phone calls translate into more parents actually taking the plunge to teach their children at home won't be known until the next school year begins in the fall." Despite this last fact, however, Schnaiberg did point out that "since the Columbine shootings, 21 students in the 89,000 Jefferson County district [where Columbine High School is located] have withdrawn to be home schooled."

Michael Farris (1999b), President and Founder of the HSLDA, responded to this issue in "Public School Violence and the Impulse to Home School," in which he asked, "Should parents turn to home schooling because of such incidents [school violence]?" Farris reasons that, realistically, "there is a higher possibility that your child will be killed in a car accident on the way to the mall than in a shooting incident in school." He continues, however, to note that such "statistical guess work takes an incomplete look at the picture."

Farris goes on to detail the "many forms of school violence that are less intense than the Colorado shooting, but are still deeply troubling." In sum, Farris argues that the social culture of schools – which can involve "Dungeons and Dragons . . . Marilyn Manson . . . the black world of the Goth culture . . . and excessive and vicious ridicule" – is also dangerous to children's well-being, and is also a strong reason to consider home schooling as an educational alternative. What else do those involved with the home schooling community have to say about the impact of school violence? The next section details some of their responses.

The Interviews

It seems logical, given that the Columbine shooting occurred in Colorado, to question one of that state's home school leaders. Kevin Swanson, Executive Director of Christian Home Educators of Colorado (CHEC), told Schnaiberg (1999), for her article in Education Week (noted above) that his "organization since late April has seen the number of first-time callers grow from an average of 60 a month to about 400"; Swanson also allowed that this pace was "winding down along with the end of the school year."

And the reasons given for this sudden deluge of phone calls inquiring into home schooling? According to Swanson (again, in Schnaiberg's 1999 article), "Though many

parents who called expressed safety concerns . . . most already were contemplating home schooling. We got a few panic calls, but generally, it's not people who just came upon it. This was just the final *push* [emphasis added]."

After a period of approximately 6 months, did Swanson have anything new to add? In our conversation of January 26, 2000, he did, indeed, have a great deal to add. Specifically, he wanted to amend his statement to Schnaiberg (1999, cited above) concerning his impression that the phone calls were "winding down." He told me that he did believe, at that time, that they were. In reality, however, Swanson said that the calls "didn't subside much. They died down a little bit in July, but they picked up again in August"; apparently, the increased number of phone calls into the CHEC office continues pretty much unabated to this day.

Another notable difference the Columbine shooting made in the CHEC operations involved their informational workshops. Prior to the shooting, they held these introductory workshops on home schooling three times a year. Since the shooting, they have found it necessary to hold such workshops once a month. Not only did they quadruple the number of workshops per year (from 3 to 12), but the workshops have been consistently full (about 40 attendees).

According to Swanson, the shooting was "the straw that broke the camel's back." He added that he believed the positive coverage of home schooling in the media had established home schooling in the public's mind as a "positive or at least neutral option." Swanson credited the media with "keeping home schooling in front of people" as an educational alternative.

Brian Ray (President, National Home Education Research Institute) was also interviewed by Schnaiberg (1999), and he reiterated to me what he had told her, that is, "for those considering the option . . . this school safety issue is definitely going to bump

some people off the fence.” He also told me that school violence provides parents with “another clear, concrete reason to home school, “ but that “we won’t know until late spring [what effect the violence has had on home school enrollment and decisions], and then only if the states collect home school statistics” (personal communication, 1/25/00).

Tom Lewis (President, Arizona Families for Home Education) informed me of his belief that the recent spate of shootings and violence in public schools had “created a new type of home schooling family. They’re home schooling out of a real fear for their children’s safety” (personal communication, June, 1998). Please note that this particular conversation took place in the summer of 1998, almost an entire year *before* the Columbine incident.

What do those involved with the “business” side of home schooling have to say about the impact of school violence? Elizabeth Lockwood, as Sales and Marketing Director for Critical Thinking Skills Press, Inc., is responsible for arranging vendor booths for her company at the larger home schooling conferences around the country. This past year, this press was represented at a total of 18 home schooling conferences and/or curriculum fairs. One of these fairs was held in Denver, CO. According to Ms. Lockwood (personal communication, 1/19/00), the Colorado home schooling organization responsible for setting up the conference had informed vendors that the recent Columbine shootings in Littleton, CO, would have a very positive impact on the conference and its attendance. In fact, Ms. Lockwood continued, they seemed to be quite sure of this, that this was “more than speculation” on their part.

However, according to Ms. Lockwood, the 1999 Denver home schooling conference was a bit of a disappointment. There was actually a drop in sales at their booth from the previous year. Apparently, their income from the Denver conference

in 1998 was approximately \$7,800, while the total for 1999 was only \$5,400 (E. Lockwood, personal communication, 1/19/00). How can this be the case, given the dramatic increase in Denver of home school inquiries?

Laurie Britt, a home schooling parent and a sales representative for Critical Thinking Skills Press, actually worked this particular Denver conference, and provides a possible answer to this seeming paradox. Ms. Britt informed me that, according to the conference representatives that she spoke with, "attendance at the conference was actually way up" (personal communication, 1/20/00). The basic reason that this increased attendance did *not* translate into increased vendor sales had to do with the fact that many of the participants attended *only* the informational and the "how to" sessions of the conference; they did not actually proceed further into visiting the vendor booth sections. This apparent paradox forms a useful analogy and/or parallel for some of the larger conclusions reached in this paper, as detailed in the following, final section.

Conclusion

What can be concluded from this brief, epidemiological look at the push and pull of events in the larger society and their relationship to a choice for home schooling? Unquestionably, those events noted did have an impact -- an impact in many ways analogous to the Denver home schooling conference of 1999. That is, interest in home schooling greatly increased as a result of the Columbine shooting (as was evidenced in the increased attendance at the information sessions of the Denver conference), but real decisions to change to home schooling as a result of the shooting did not necessarily match this heightened level of interest (as evidenced by the fact that sales at the vendor portion of the conference were *not* up dramatically, as was the attendance).

More precisely, the impact of the discussed events made be safely seen to have had the following impact in relation to the home schooling movement:

- -- Increased interest in the home schooling movement as an educational alternative, as evidenced by (a) the greatly elevated number of phone call inquiries reported by home schooling groups, and (b) increased attendance at informational and "how to" workshops at home schooling conferences. This increased level of interest was also evidenced -- at least within the CHEC -- by the need for additional introductory workshops (up from 3 to 12 times a year, with full attendance at each session).
- -- Some increased decisions to home school rather than send children to public school. As several of our home school experts noted, most of those motivated to change as a reaction to the violence in the schools were already contemplating home schooling. How many parents decided to home school as a reaction to the shootings may never be known, as "the lack of hard data on home schooling makes tracking the movement difficult" (Schnaiberg, 1999).
- -- Parents who currently home school may have become even more determined to continue to home school their children,

Obviously, the negative "push" of Columbine and similar tragedies is easier to document than is the positive "pull" of home schooling media coverage. There is a connection, however, in that this pull -- while inherently more gentle in nature and less violently memorable than school shootings -- helped to establish home schooling in the mind of the public as a possible and "positive" educational alternative (K. Swanson, July 26, 2000, personal communication). Clearly, then, this positive pull and negative push worked together in the larger society, at least in some instances, to effect a decision to home school.

It is, of course, to be most sincerely and genuinely hoped that there will be no further violence involving the public schools. Should this unhappy trend continue,

however, it seems likely that more and more parents will be “bumped off the fence” (Ray cited in Schnaiberg, 1999) – or *pushed* off the fence – into making a decision to adopt home schooling as an educational alternative.

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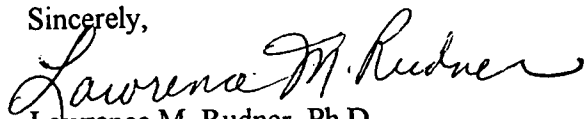
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