

Michigan's Role in Monitoring Home Schools

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If you live in Michigan, chances are you know somebody who is home-schooling his or her children. And, if you do, chances are you know more about the education those children are getting than the state of Michigan does.

This first statement may be a source of surprise; the second, of concern. After all, just how many kids in Michigan are being home-schooled? No one really knows, because currently Michigan has no way to accurately track home schools. A reasonable estimate, however, would be that, state-wide, more than five percent of Michigan's students are schooled at home. This may not sound like much, but it adds up: it's as if all the parents in five of the largest public school districts in the state – Flint, Grand Rapids, Saginaw, Traverse City and Utica – were to decide to keep and teach their kids at home. Or all the parents in the Birmingham, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, Lansing, Livonia, Pontiac, and Walled Lake school districts. That's a lot of kids – more than 120,000 students in all, more than the number now attending charter schools in Michigan. The state has a system for monitoring the education of charter school students, but currently there is no tracking system for the comparable number of students who are being home-schooled.

Of course, home schooling is not unique to Michigan. Each state has its own policy for home school students and families. Some have strict rules regulating how

families may home school their children, while others, such as Michigan, do not monitor home school families at all. What role, if any, should the state play in monitoring home school families? What exactly is the law concerning home schooling in Michigan, and what are the arguments for and against an increased role for the state?

How many home school students are in Michigan?

Because Michigan does not require home school families to register, the state does not have an accurate account of how many students are home schooled. Approximately 2,000 home school students report to the Michigan Department of Education. Based on census data and enrollment information, the Education Policy Center at Michigan State University estimates that there may be as many as 100,000 home school students who do not report to the state. Table 1 illustrates the number of students who are unaccounted for by the state.

Not all of the students unaccounted for are necessarily home school students. The rate used to estimate the total number of dropouts (5.c%) may be too low. The number of students attending nonpublic schools, which are not required to report to the state, may be under-reported. On the other hand, the census age range of 5-18 may exclude students under five or older than 18 who are attending school. Still, the Education Policy Center believes these



Table 1. Student Enrollment in Michigan

	Number
Enrollment in Michigan Public Schools (K-12)	1,666,741
Reported Enrollment in Michigan Nonpublic schools	185,885
Number of reported home schoolers	1,914
TOTAL	1,854,540
Number of 5-18 year olds in Michigan (U.S. Census)	2,067,317
Students not accounted for in enrollment data	212,777
Estimated number of student dropouts (5.2%)	86,671
Number of students not accounted for	126,106

estimates are as close to being accurate as we can get. If so, there are an estimated 100,000 or more “missing” students in the state of Michigan. That is a substantial number of students, by any account. Currently, Michigan has no means for knowing who these “missing” students are or where they are located in the state. But Michigan, like every state, has laws requiring school attendance. How could so many children be unaccounted for? The answer is exemption.

Home School Regulations in Michigan

Michigan’s compulsory attendance law requires children ages 6-16 to attend school [MCL 380.1561 (3)]. Exemptions (3) (a) and (3) (f) allow children to be educated in the child’s home by his or her parents or legal guardian. The difference between Exemption (3) (a) and (3) (f) is that parents using exemption (3) (a) report to the Michigan Department of Education using the Nonpublic School Membership Report. Exemption (f) home schools have no relationship with the Michigan Department of Education. They may, if they so choose, report to their local intermediate school district (ISD). In fact, parents choosing to operate a home school under exemption (3) (f) are under no obligation to report to any public agency.

Whether they report or not, home school students are still eligible for certain public school services. For example, they can take nonessential elective classes such as band, drama, art, physical education, music and advanced placement courses at their local public school. In addition, local boards of education have discretion on policies allowing home school students to participate in athletics and extracurricular activities. This means that local districts may know about some home schoolers – but none of these data are reported to or collected by the state.

How do Michigan’s home school policies compare to policies across the nation?

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) has released a study of home school laws in all 50 states. The HSLDA rates Michigan the best state for home schoolers because of the freedom given to parents. Pennsylvania is cited as the state with the worst home school policy, because home school programs there are governed by statutory provisions enacted by the Pennsylvania General Assembly (HSLDA *Court Report*, 1999). The following table, based on the HSLDA study, summarizes the differences between Michigan and Pennsylvania law regarding home schooling.

Each column demonstrates a progressively stricter level of regulation by the state, beginning with Michigan's Exemption (3)(f) that requires no regulation and ending with Pennsylvania's option for parents to provide home schooling as an extension of a church-affiliated day school, which requires the principal to file an affidavit. These examples of state policy demonstrate the wide variation in regulation among the states.

The major differences between Michigan and Pennsylvania are requirements concerning teacher qualifications, record keeping and testing. Since Michigan does not require parents who home school to register with the state or local ISDs, it has no way to know how many students are home schooled, or under what conditions. With a more systematic notification process, Pennsylvania can better monitor its home school population. Testing is required for the first home schooling option in Pennsylvania, but not when the home school student has a certified teacher or when the student attends a religious school in addition to the home school.

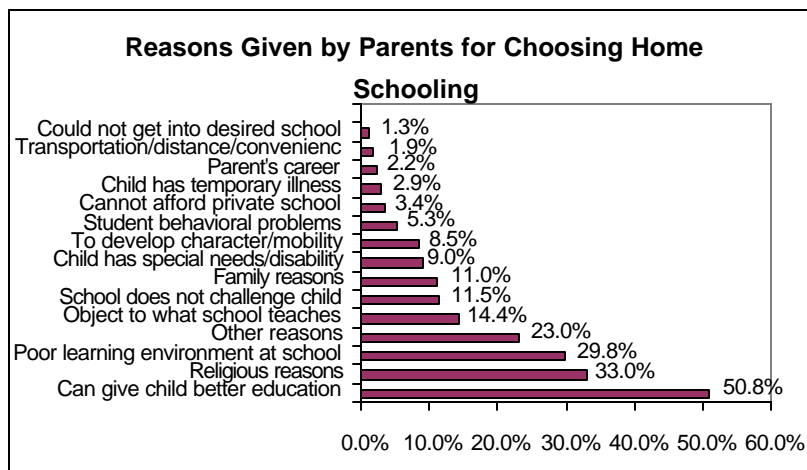
Why Parents Choose Home Schooling

Parents have various reasons for home schooling their children. National surveys show that half the parents who choose to home school their children say they do so because they believe they can give their child a better education at home (50.8%). Parents in the survey also cited religious reasons (33.0%),

a poor learning environment at school (29.8%), and objections to what public and private school teach (14.4%) as reasons for schooling their children at home. Five of the top six reasons reported by parents in the survey involve dissatisfaction with public and private schools. Home schools allow parents to exercise their right to provide what they perceive to be the best possible education for their children.

Critics of home schools often argue that home school children will grow up in isolation from their peers, but the growing number of home school families has created many opportunities for home school children to interact with other home school children. Some home school groups and organizations have formed athletic teams, academic teams, support groups, and social groups. Older home school students often take courses at local community colleges. There are also many "virtual" schools that students can attend on the Internet. Thus, many home school families are able to provide social support and connections outside the home to provide a more comprehensive learning environment.

Finally, advocates argue that home school children are generally quite successful. In several studies, home school students score as well or higher than other students on standardized tests. Many home school students who attend college fare well in their new setting.



Source: Blielick et al., 2001

[Note: Responses do not sum to 100 percent because respondents were permitted to choose more than one response]

Because of the apparent success of home school students, many home school parents believe that there is no need for the state to regulate how they educate their children.

What Is the Proper Role for the State?

Proponents for state monitoring of home schools point out that most states have a constitutional obligation to ensure that all young citizens are adequately educated. In Michigan,

Article VIII of the Constitution asserts that the state has an affirmative responsibility to educate its children for the common good. At the same time, Article VIII does not restrict the rights of parents and guardians to choose how their children will be educated, or to choose among public, private, or home school options. The fundamental question is thus whether the rights of the children as learners and citizens are separate from the rights of parents, and what

	Michigan Home School State Option (Exemption (3) (f))	Michigan Nonpublic School Option (Exemption (3) (a))	Pennsylvania Home School State Option	Pennsylvania Private Tutor	Pennsylvania Day School/ Church School
Legal Requirements	Establish and operate a home education program	None	Establish and operate a home education program	Use a private tutor	Establish and/or operate a home school as an extension of a day school operated by a church or other religious body
Minimum Attendance Requirements	None	None	180 days per year or 900 hours at elementary level or 990 hours at secondary level	180 days per year or 900 hours at the elementary level or 990 hours at the secondary level	180 days per year or 900 hours at the elementary level or 990 hours at the secondary level
Teacher Qualifications	None	Certification (unless religious exemption)	High School Diploma or equivalent	Teacher Certification	None
Reporting Requirements	None	Submit Form SM4325 to MDE	Annually file a notarized affidavit with the local superintendent	File a copy of certification and criminal history record with the local superintendent	School principal must file a notarized affidavit with the department of education
Recordkeeping Requirements	None	Maintain records of enrollment, courses, and teacher qualifications	Maintain a portfolio of materials used, work done, standardized tests results in grades 3, 5, and 8, and a written evaluation completed by June 30 of each year	None	None
Required Testing	None	None	Administer standardized tests in grades 3, 5, and 8; submit results as part of portfolio	None	None

Source: Home School Legal Defense Association

steps the state should take to protect the rights of both children and parents. Laws (including compulsory education statutes) establishing the state's authority in this domain have been upheld at every judicial level.

Opponents of home school monitoring assert that parents are the primary authority figure in a child's life, and that the state should have no role in how children are raised. Home school advocates argue that parents have a fundamental right to choose how their children will be educated, and that the state has no right to interfere in this choice. From this perspective, the rights of parents supersede the rights of their children, making the welfare of children solely the responsibility of their parents. Those of the opposing view hold that children have rights as learners, and that ignoring or neglecting these rights can result in educational neglect or abuse. When children are physically neglected or abused, they argue, society recognizes the state's obligation to intercede in order to protect the child. Proponents of state monitoring maintain that the state has a similar right to intercede when a child's educational development is neglected. In this view, education is a state interest as well as an individual right, because it is essential for good government and a strong economy.

Conclusion

States vary considerably in how they choose to monitor home school families. Policies range from no involvement to requiring yearly portfolios detailing the student's achievement and academic progress. Respecting the right of parents to choose how they wish to educate their children while holding parents accountable for the education their children receive are both important state goals. Requiring home school parents to submit an educational report to the state may make them feel as if their right to educate their children in the manner they deem most appropriate is being violated, even if that is the only restriction placed upon them. On the other hand, the lack of even minimal requirements conveys the message that parents are not accountable to anyone for their child's education. Each state must decide how to balance the rights of parents, the rights of children, and the interests of the state.

Fewer than 2,000 home school students report to the Michigan Department of Education, but the total number of home schools students in Michigan is many times that number. There is no reason to doubt that *most* of those students are receiving a sound education at home. Still, the state has a constitutional obligation to insure that *all* students are being educated.

At the very least, the State should amend the current 3(f) exemption to require that home school parents register with the Michigan Department of Education or their local ISD. The parents would only need to give the child's name and confirm that the child will not be enrolling in public school but will be home schooled instead. This system would not infringe on the rights of parents to educate their children, but it would signal that the state takes seriously its obligation, and that of parents, to leave no child behind.

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