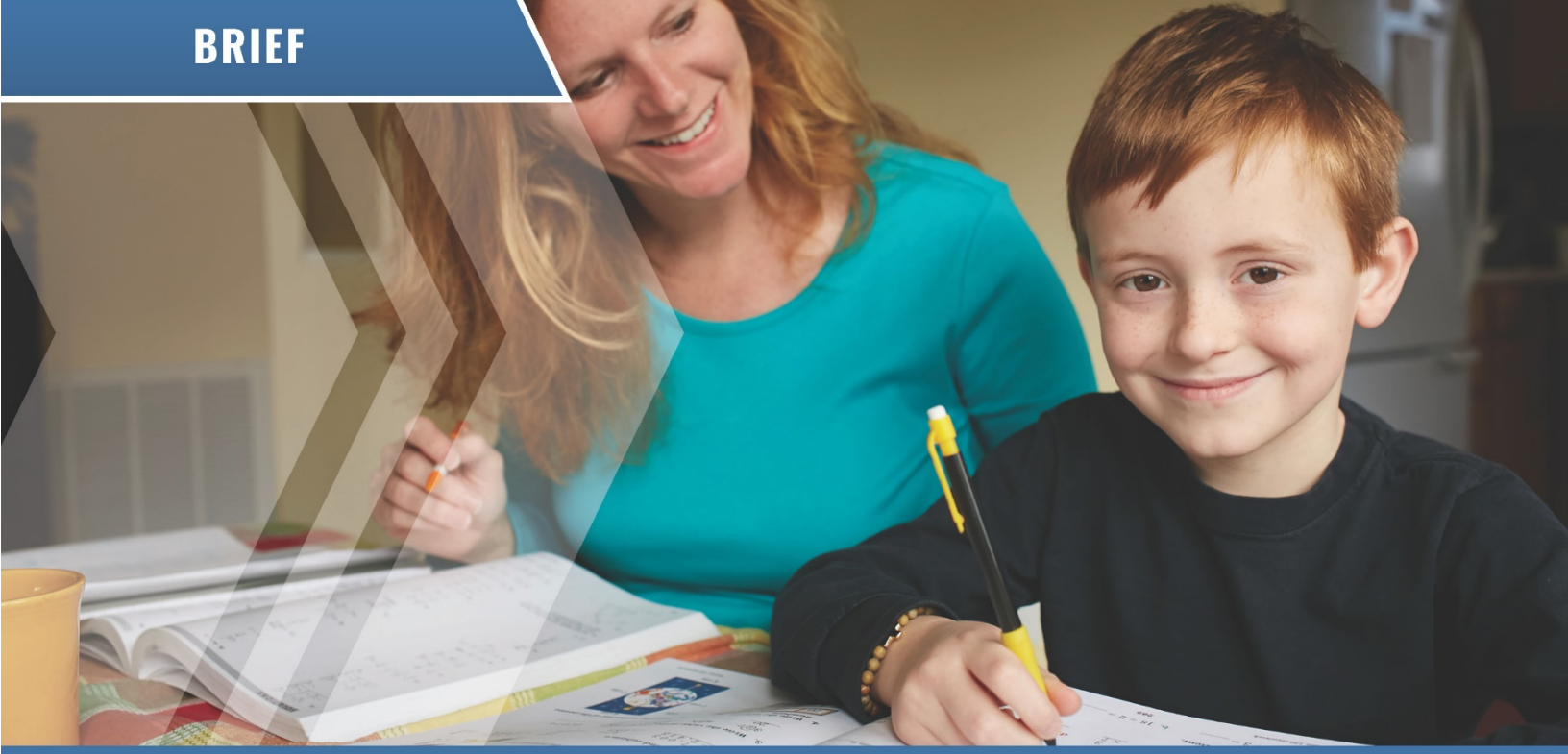
BRIEF



PORTFOLIO OF CHOICE

Homeschooling

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CCNETWORK National Center

Choice Strengthening the State of Choice in America's Schools

Portfolio of Choice: Homeschooling

The National Comprehensive Center

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Portfolio of Choice: Homeschooling

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Key Takeaways

- All 50 states and the District of Columbia have laws or policies in place related to homeschooling
- States differ substantially in whether and how they capture data on homeschooling, making comprehensive analyses nearly impossible. Limited existing data suggest:
  - During the 2016–17 school year, approximately 1.7 million students were homeschooled, representing just over 3 percent of all K–12 students nationally.
  - The majority of homeschooled students are White (59%), followed by Hispanic (26%), Black (8%), Other (4%), and Asian/Pacific Islander (3%).[2]
  - Nearly 40 percent of homeschooled students live in the suburbs, 29 percent in cities, 22 percent in rural communities, and 11 percent in small towns.[3]
- Due to limited empirical evidence and the wide variance in regulation across the country, there is no definitive research on the academic outcomes of homeschooled students, That being the case, there is no evidence of either positive or negative effects.
- Since many homeschooling families choose this option for privacy, religious, or political reasons, policymakers must balance their obligation to collect data and provide safe environments for students with parental autonomy.

[1]https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp
[2]https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp
[3]https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp

Introduction

Prior to the American Revolutionary War, parents bore the vast majority of responsibility for educating their children. Homeschooling was, in effect, the societal standard. That began to change in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1852, Massachusetts enacted America's first compulsory school attendance law, which required children between the ages of 8 and 14 to attend school.[1] By 1918, every state had such a statute—the majority of which subjected parents to criminal sanctions if they did not send their children to school.[2]

For the next half-century, the vast majority of American children attended school in public or private institutions. Homeschooling remained on the fringes of society, and, by the 1970s, was nearly extinct.[3] However, as state and local governments took on greater responsibility for

[1] https://www.bostonmagazine.com/education/2018/05/17/tbt-compulsory-education-massachusetts/

[2] http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.540.9790&rep=rep1&type=pdf

[3] *Homeschooling in America: Capturing and Assessing the Movement* by Joseph Murphy https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-81FIstRORAC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=history+of+homeschooling&ots=pyhHvQkesg&sig=vi32Cnzvi07GFYa2hBOVeCXL1Uk#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20homeschooling&f=false

educating children, social and legal tension among states, schools, and parents arose. These underlying tensions came to a head as they met with a shifting American landscape. Growing critiques of the American system of institutionalized education coincided with broader demands for cultural change, as well as the civil rights and antiwar movements. At the same time, the Christian Right was emerging as a powerful social and political force. Their conservative views on the content taught in public schools, from evolution to sex education, drove many families to opt out of the public school system. Amidst these social and political changes, the nation saw a resurgence in the number of families choosing to forego traditional educational institutions in favor of homeschooling their children.[4]

The religious and political underpinnings of the homeschool movement make it an especially fraught space for policymakers today. Consistent, reliable data are hard to come by given vastly differing opinions on the role states should play in creating structures, tracking data, and monitoring outcomes on homeschooling. The goal of this brief is to cut through some of this complexity and provide policymakers with an objective resource on homeschooling, including what we do know about the students and families who participate in homeschooling and how policymakers might think about crafting policies that both allow for parental choice and ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education that meets their needs.

What is Homeschooling?

Though the concept of homeschooling seems obvious on its surface, it does not have a single, agreed-upon definition. Scholars largely agree that to be considered homeschooling, families need to make a deliberate decision not to educate their children in a traditional public or private institution and instead educate them at home. A broad range of structures and activities fall within that definition. As a result, some scholars discuss homeschooling in relation to additional elements, such as: 1) funding sources, which clearly articulate that the child's education is funded by the family rather than the government; and 2) provision of educational services stating that the parent is responsible for educating the child, rather than a state-funded or privately financed employee.[5]

A number of terms capture these characteristics, including *home-based education, home education, unschooling, home-centered learning, home instruction,* and *deschooling.*[6] Given the differing terminology and large set of activities that could fall under the umbrella of homeschooling, it is helpful to think about what homeschooling *isn't.* Based on the definitional characteristics described above, the following scenarios would likely **not** constitute homeschooling:

[4] http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.540.9790&rep=rep1&type=pdf

[5] https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-81FIstRORAC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=history+of+homeschooling&ots=pyhHvQkesg&sig=vi32Cnzvi07GFYa2hBOVeCXL1Uk#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20homeschooling&f=false

[6] https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=-81FIstRORAC&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=history+of+homeschooling&ots=pyhHvQkesg&sig=vi32Cnzvi07GFYa2hBOVeCXL1Uk#v=onepage&q=history%20of%20homeschooling&f=false

- Students receiving their educations in fully virtual or hybrid online schools, since professional teachers are providing education services in those contexts.
- Children who are educated at home because of a medical or other condition that prohibits them from attending a traditional school. This situation lacks an explicit parental rejection of traditional schools, and, in many cases, these students receive some educational supports through the local school district.
- Children who are not in school because of abuse, neglect, their parents' itinerant lifestyles, or other conditions that preclude a high-quality, home-based learning environment.

This is not an exhaustive list of what homeschooling is not, nor is it universally agreed-upon. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), for example, defines homeschooled students as "school-age children who receive instruction at home instead of at a public or private school either all or most of the time."[7] While NCES' definition explicitly "excludes students who were enrolled in public or private school more than 25 hours per week and students who were homeschooled only because of temporary illness," it includes those whose parents indicated they homeschooled their children and said that the child's main provider of instruction is an online curriculum. As a result, there is likely some overlap in NCES' data between students who are homeschooled and those who attend a full-time online school.

As the NCES example demonstrates, the lack of definitional clarity about what activities and arrangements constitute homeschooling means that the available data about it lacks precision. That does not mean it is useless. The rest of this brief offers insight into what existing data *are* able to tell us about homeschooling. Going forward, policymakers have an opportunity to strengthen their own states' definitions of homeschooling and align data collection policies and procedures accordingly.

How do States Design Homeschooling Policies?

States' approaches to homeschool policies vary widely. This variance is largely due to differing perspectives on the extent to which the government should regulate homeschooling and the educational choices individual families make regarding issues like curriculum or assessment. Families who opt to homeschool are deliberately choosing to educate students outside of established public and private systems, suggesting a certain level of rejection of existing systems and governmental involvement and regulation. Policymakers, on the other hand, are responsible for ensuring all children have access to safe, high-quality learning environments, and for intervening when those opportunities are subpar. The extent to which this oversight should reach into the homes and choices of families who choose to homeschool is an ongoing tension, and one that policymakers must contend with as they design homeschooling policies.

[7] https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

Due to the widely differing perspectives on the role of government regulation of homeschooling, there is no consensus on what constitutes "good" homeschooling policy. What one group views as restrictive might be seen as inadequate by another. Grassroots advocacy organizations like the National Home Education Research Institute (NHERI) and the Homeschool Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) believe in minimal or no regulation. They are rooted in the historical homeschool position that "parents know best" and resist any kind of regulation or what they see as interference from local or state authorities. Other advocacy organizations, such as the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE), are focused on protection for homeschooled students and are open to notification, child safety policies, accountability, and intervention mechanisms.

Despite the lack of consensus on "good" homeschooling policy, there are some structures and design elements that policymakers should understand. First, there are two common legal structures for enabling homeschooling:

- **Homeschool statutes or alternative instruction clauses:** Many states have dedicated homeschool statutes that give either the local school district or the state education agency oversight authority over homeschooling. States with alternative instruction clauses exempt children from compulsory school attendance if they are receiving alternative instruction elsewhere.

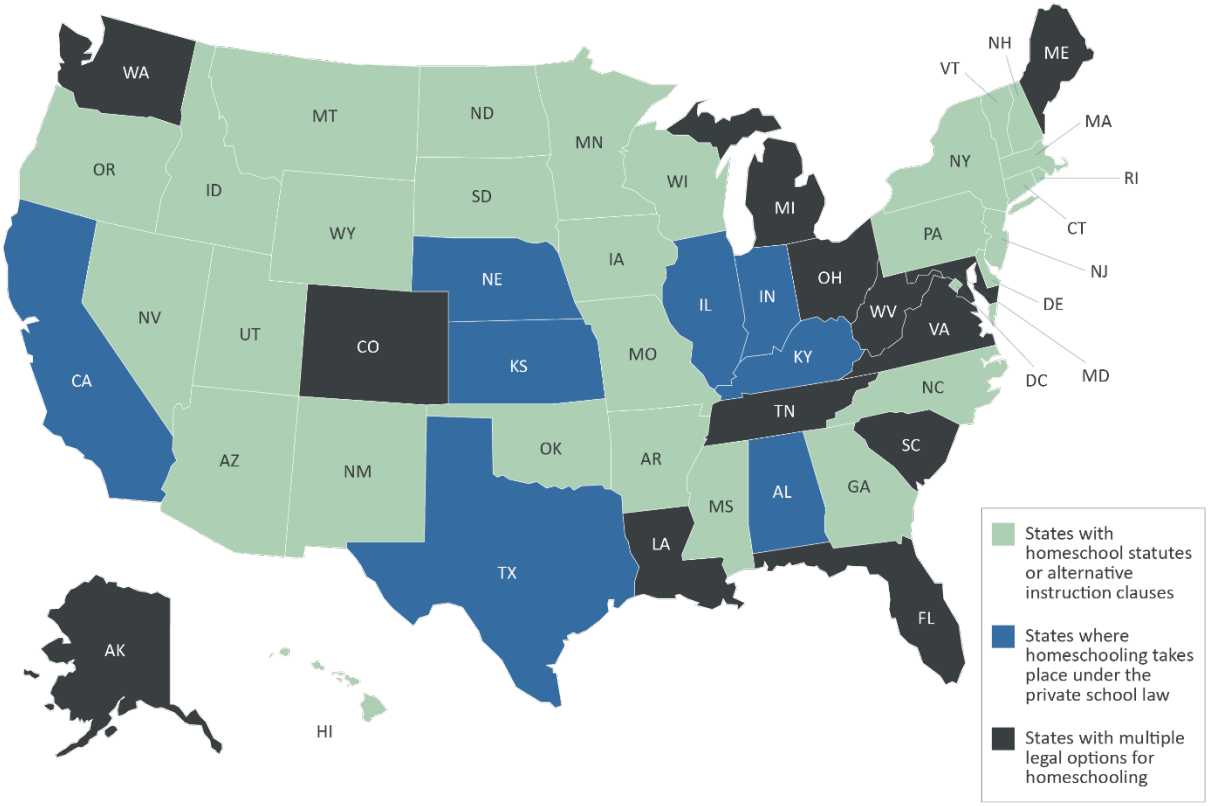
- **Homeschooling takes place under the private school statute:** Some states allow homeschools to function as individual private schools, while others allow parents to enroll their children in an existing private school but educate them at home (this is typically called a private "umbrella" school).[8]

Many states have multiple options in place to allow families to homeschool their children. Colorado, Florida, Maine, and Washington, for example, have both a homeschooling statute and legislation that allows families to homeschool through a private "umbrella" school. Louisiana, Michigan, and Ohio have a homeschooling statute and allow families to register as a private school in order to homeschool their children. Virginia has a homeschool statute and allows families to homeschool by claiming a religious exemption. Alaska has a homeschool statute and allows families to homeschool through a correspondence program.[9] Figure 1 illustrates states' different legal approaches to homeschooling.

[8] https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/advocacy/current-policy/homeschool-options/

[9] https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/advocacy/current-policy/homeschool-options/

Figure 1. Legal structures that states use to enable families to homeschool their children



In addition to these legal structures, state policies vary widely in what they require of families or what they allow them to do. Table 1 describes the most common elements of state homeschooling policies, which include a range of parental responsibilities, from notifying the education system of their intent to homeschool, their approach and qualifications to provide instruction, if and how they will assess their child's learning, and the kinds of records they must keep. There are also policy requirements in some states for children that are at-risk or have disabilities.

Table 1 demonstrates the various ways that state policymakers approach homeschooling policies.[10] States' approaches reflect different balances of two goals that can, at times, be in tension with one another: the goal to have robust statewide data to inform policy and the goal to preserve familial privacy. As discussed in greater detail in the best practices section of this brief, parents who choose to homeschool are often deliberately separating themselves from "the system." That separation may be driven by a desire for privacy from government systems. On the other hand, there are valid reasons for government agencies, such as local school districts or state departments of education, to need to understand how many students are being homeschooled and the extent to which those students are gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to be active members of society.

[10] https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/policy-issues/current-policy/

Policymakers must work to balance these competing perspectives in designing homeschool policies, and where they land is often reflective of the importance they place on those two goals: More robust policies with ample data collection suggest a policy orientation that favors statewide data, while looser policies suggest an orientation toward familial privacy.

Table 1. Common elements of states' homeschooling policies[1]

Element and description	Options	Number of states
Notification What type of notification must parents give about their intent to homeschool?	No notice	11
	One-time notice	11
	Annual notice	28 + DC
Parent Qualifications What qualifications must parents have to homeschool?	No requirements	39
	High school diploma/GED or other approval	8 + DC
	High school diploma/GED or monitoring	2
	Some college/training course, or be deemed eligible	1
Instruction Time & Subjects How many hours or days must parents provide instruction? Is there a required set of subjects?	No requirements for instruction time or subjects taught	14
	Parents must meet minimal requirements for instruction time and/or subjects taught, but there are no policies or procedures in place to verify whether parents meet them.	24 + DC
	Parents must meet more rigorous requirements for instruction time and/or subjects taught and are held accountable for meeting those requirements through regular academic assessments	12

Table 1. Common elements of states' homeschooling policies[1] (continued)

Element and description	Options	Number of states
Recordkeeping What academic records must parents keep on their children? Are parents required to submit other records, such as immunizations or birth certificates, to the state or local school district?	No academic recordkeeping of the students' progress required	46 + DC
	Require parents to maintain records of academics, such as test scores or portfolios of students work	4
	Require school districts or state departments of education to file information such as age, proof of residency, or proof of immunization	4
Assessment & Intervention Does state law require that homeschool students take assessments? Do parents face intervention if their children fail to make academic progress?	Requirements for assessment exist but include exemptions for students, no minimum score, or no requirement for submitting results	15
	Students must take a standardized test or undergo a portfolio review of their academic progress	9 + DC
At-Risk Children Are parents screened or do protections exist for at-risk children in the home?	Do not require background checks or take measures to protect children from abuse or neglect in a homeschool environment.	48 + DC
	Provide protection for at-risk homeschooled students No assessments	PA prohibits homeschooling if a parent has been convicted of a range of violent or sexual offenses in the past 5 years. AR prohibits homeschooling if a registered sex offender lives in the household.

Table 1. Common elements of states' homeschooling policies[1] (continued)

Element and description	Options	Number of states
Access to Extracurricular Activities Can homeschool students participate in local school district sports and/or extracurriculars?	Prohibit homeschooled students from participating in interscholastic activities	20
	Allow homeschooled student participation	20 + DC
	Allow access with district approval	5
	Allow access if enrolled part-time or dual-enrolled	5
Students with Disabilities What requirements are in place to support families who homeschool students with special needs?	By law, local school districts must provide an evaluation of homeschooled students if a parent requests it. Generally, an Individualized Education Program (IEP) team will not provide services unless the child is enrolled part- or full-time within the local district.	No states require a homeschooled student with eligibility for IEP services to receive those services outside the local school district. Parents who choose to homeschool a qualified student effectively waive their right to those services.

[1] Current Homeschool Law

Source: Coalition for Responsible Home Education, *Current Homeschool Law*

Who Homeschools and Why

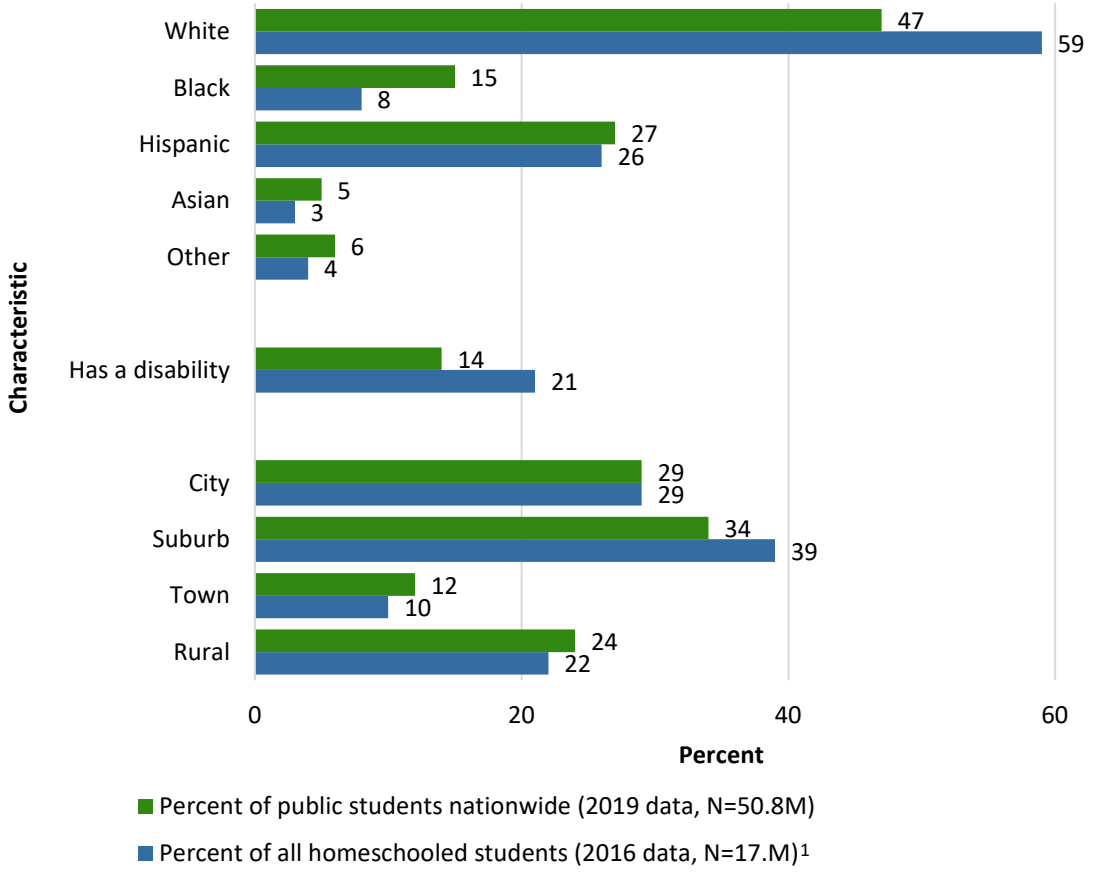
The variety of policy approaches to and varied definitions of homeschooling mean that consistent, comprehensive data on homeschooling are hard to come by. As a result of the various state notification policies, the field lacks comprehensive data on even the most basic question—how many students are homeschooled? Estimates from various sources, including NCES and homeschool advocacy groups, suggest it is in the range of 1.5 to 2.5 million. NCES is an important federal source of homeschooling data. The agency collects and reports information on the number and percentage of students who are homeschooled. It also captures the perspectives of families who homeschool in the Parent and Family Involvement in Education (PFI) Survey. This survey collects information about students in grades K–12 (or who are homeschooled for equivalent grades), and includes questions about homeschooling for relevant respondents.[11] According to NCES, during 2016 there were approximately 1.7 million students homeschooled across the country. This is a substantial

[11] https://nces.ed.gov/nhes/homeschooling.asp

increase from 1999, when NCES reported just 850,000 homeschooled students.[12] However, because state policies and reporting criteria have changed over time, it is likely that this increase reflects both an actual increase in the number of homeschooled students and broader requirements for reporting and counting them.

As Figure 2 illustrates, data on the demographics of homeschooled students suggest that as a population, homeschooled students are more likely to be white and suburban than the population as a whole, and are more likely to have a disability (though special education status for homeschool students is parent-reported, not necessarily diagnosed by an education specialist).

Figure 2. Characteristics of homeschooled students



[1] https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

[2] https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=372#PK12_enrollment

[3] https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=64

[4] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_tla.pdf

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, *Homeschooling in the United States*; National Center for Education Statistics, *Back-to-school statistics*; National Center for Education Statistics, *Students with disabilities*; and National Center for Education Statistics, *The Status of Rural Education*

[12] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp

Moreover, homeschool students are more likely to live in two-parent households than the population as a whole, and the adults in these families are more likely than the average adult to have a bachelor's degree or higher. However, a higher percentage of homeschool families earn less than $75,000 per year compared to the overall population (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demographics of homeschool students' families[1]

Characteristic	Percent of all homeschool students	Percent of U.S. population
Two parents in the household	80	69[2]
Highest education level of adults: high school diploma or less	30	38[3]
Highest education level of adults: associate's degree or some college	25	26
Highest education level of adults: bachelor's degree	30	23
Highest education level of adults: graduate or professional degree	15	14
Household income $20,000 or less	11	8[4]
Household income $20,001 to $50,000	29	22
Household income $50,001 to $75,000	26	17
Household income $75,001 to $100,000	16	14
Household income over $100,000	19	39

[1] https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp

[2] https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html

[3] https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2019/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html

[4] https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-finc/finc-01.html

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, Table 206.10; U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Census Bureau, Table 1; and U.S. Census Bureau, FINC-01.

The distribution of homeschooled students across grade levels is approximately the same as the K–12 population more generally (see Table 3).

Table 3. Grade-level distribution of homeschool students

Characteristic	Percent of Homeschooled students (%)	Percent of Public K–12 students (%)[1]
Elementary (grades K–5)	45	44
Middle (grades 6–8)	24	23
High school (grades 9–12)	31	30

[1]2019 projected data from: https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_203.10.asp Does not include Pre-K or ungraded students

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, Table 203.10 and Table 206.10

Like other educational options available to families, parents have a variety of reasons for choosing homeschooling. NCES' most recent National Household Education Survey (NHES) asked parents about their top reasons for homeschooling (see Table 4).[13]

Table 4. Parental reasons for homeschooling

Reason	Percent of parents rating reason as "Important"	Percent of parents rating reason as "Most Important"
A concern about environment of other schools	80	34
A desire to provide moral instruction	67	5
A dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools	61	17
A desire to provide religious instruction	51	16
A desire to provide a nontraditional approach to child's education	39	6
Other reason (e.g., family time, finances, travel, flexibility)	22	11
Child has other special needs	20	6
Child has a physical or mental health problem	14	6
Child has a temporary illness	4	0

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016*, Table 8.

[13]https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017102.pdf

According to that survey, four out of five parents indicate that concerns about the environment in other schools drive their decision to homeschool; more than one-third indicated that this was the most important element of their decision. The ability to provide moral or religious instruction was important to more than half of families, as was dissatisfaction with the academic instruction in local schools.

Although homeschooling is a choice available to all families, in reality the ability for a family to execute a decision to homeschool is closely tied to that family's financial, educational, and temporal resources.[14] For families with constraints in one or more of those domains, such as low-income families or single-parent households, homeschooling may simply be infeasible.

It's important to note that these survey results reflect parents' perspectives in the aggregate—they are not disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, or other demographic variables. Understanding how and why different communities choose to homeschool can be important for policymakers as they aim to strengthen the schooling options available to all students. In particular, some research suggests that families and students of color choose to homeschool due to so-called "push" and "pull" factors. The factors that "push" children of color out of traditional schooling include a culture of low expectations, an over diagnosis of special needs, and a concern for students' safety. The factors that "pull" them to homeschooling include the ability to offer multicultural and culture-specific content and homeschooling networks that connect families of color with achievement-oriented white families.[1]

[1]http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

What are the Characteristics of a "Typical" Homeschool?

One of the key motivators for homeschooling is the ability to provide an education that meets the unique needs of individual students. This means that homeschooling looks different in each family. Despite this, there are some trends worth noting. First, the vast majority (80%) of homeschool families have two parents in the home. Often these two-parent families have the flexibility to designate one parent to be the "full-time" teacher or facilitator. In more than three-quarters of homeschool families, the mother is the main provider of instruction, and the father is in 13 percent of families.[15] The majority (72%) of homeschool families report their children are homeschooled five days per week. Half of all homeschooled students receive between 25 and 40 hours of instruction weekly, while 28 percent receive between 11 and 24 hours, and 21 percent receive less than 10 hours.[16]

Next, homeschool families report regular interaction with other homeschool families. Unlike the insular early days of homeschooling, the internet has enabled the creation of a homeschooling community that is national and even international in its reach. Most states have their own homeschool webpages that enable homeschoolers to find local groups. These groups often provide

[14]http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.540.9790&rep=rep1&type=pdf

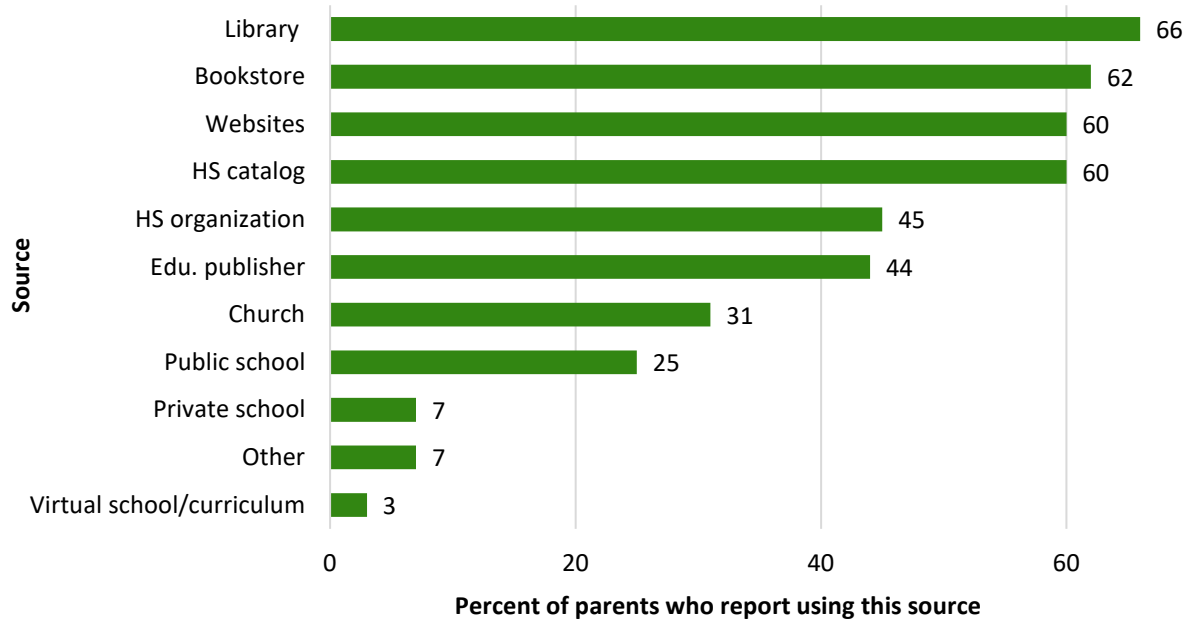
[15]Table 3: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

[16]Figures 2 and 3: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

support, encouragement, and mentorship, as well as more tangible opportunities such as field trips and even formal dances. Homeschool co-ops, groups of families who meet together regularly, provide additional socialization, academic, and/or enrichment opportunities for children.[17] These kinds of homeschool community activities are common; nearly two-thirds (61%) of homeschoolers report that their children participate in activities with other homeschooled children.[18]

Although homeschool families have a wide variety of tools, resources, and activities at their disposal, more than three-quarters of families report relying mostly or strictly on formal curriculum. Just 12 percent rely mostly or strictly on informal learning.[19] Families access educational resources through a variety of sources, as illustrated by Figure 3.

Figure 3. Parent-reported sources of curriculum and books[1]



[1]Table 6: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Homeschooling in the United States: Results from the 2012 and 2016 Parent and Family Involvement Survey*, Table 6.

Finally, homeschoolers spend about $600 per student annually, which is substantially less than the national public school average of nearly $14,000 per student.[20]

The structure of homeschooling varies substantially from one family to the next. That said, these trends offer policymakers insight into how homeschooling families typically spend their time and

[17]https://www.homeschoolfacts.com/homeschool-co-ops-homeschool-academies/

[18]Table 5: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

[19]Table 6: https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020001.pdf

[20]Homeschool spending from: https://www.nheri.org/research-facts-on-homeschooling/ national average per pupil from https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=66

resources, which may inform how state policies are designed to support homeschooling that is high in quality.

What do we know about the performance of homeschooled students?

While the performance of homeschooled students varies widely within the sector, rigorous research points to some broad trends:

Evidence on the academic outcomes of homeschooled students is quite limited.[21] Without reliable data on even the most basic questions, like how many students are homeschooled, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about the extent to which homeschooling "works." The research is also confounded by potential bias. Advocacy organizations have a stake in demonstrating that homeschooling works, so their research must be read with a note of caution. Although not comprehensive, there are some trends from the research that merit consideration:

- Older studies conducted on small samples of homeschooled students, which controlled for family background variables, found that homeschooled students:[22]
- Scored slightly better than predicted on the SAT verbal section and slightly worse than predicted on SAT math
- Scored above average in all subjects but math
- Had achievement results that correlated with their mother's educational level

Research conducted by the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, a nonprofit homeschool advocacy organization, found:

- Homeschooled students scored 15 to 30 percentile points above similar public school students on academic achievement tests.[23]
- Homeschooled students typically score above average on SAT and ACT tests.[24]
- Black students educated at home scored 23 to 42 percentile points higher than their public school peers.[25]

  (It's important to note that this study has been criticized for lacking control for key variables such as race, SES, marital status, or parental educational attainment. The survey group included in this study is skewed to include a disproportionate sample of middle-income, two-parent families, where both parents had a bachelor's degree or higher.)

Studies evaluating how homeschooled students fare when attending college found that:

- Homeschooled students tend to be significantly more involved in leadership than their peers for on-campus activities.[26]
- College students who had been homeschooled for their entire life were more open to new experiences, and exhibited more agreeableness and conscientiousness than other student groups.[27]

There is no strong evidence that homeschooling is harmful to students or detrimental to student success.

[21] https://books.google.com/books/about/Exploring_the_School_Choice_Universe.html?id=uwIoDwAAQBAJ

[22] http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

[23] http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

[24] http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

[25] http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

[26] http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

[27] http://www.scielo.br/pdf/pp/v28n2/0103-7307-pp-28-2-0213.pdf

Best Practices for Designing High-Quality Homeschool Policy

Despite nearly half a century of modern homeschooling in the United States, philosophical divisions make it difficult to design "best" policy practices. Parents who choose to homeschool are often deliberately separating themselves from "the system" and may not want to be registered with the local district or other government entity. Parental and familial privacy is a real and valid perspective. So too is the desire of many homeschooling skeptics, opponents, and advocates to have an accurate count of homeschooled students and ensure they are gaining the skills and knowledge necessary to be contributing members of society. Balancing these two opposing points of view, privacy and transparency, is a real challenge for policymakers. Nonetheless, there are some high-level recommendations that policymakers might consider as they seek to strengthen their states' homeschooling laws and policies in ways that both protect parental rights and ensure students are safe and have access to a high-quality education.

1. **Ensure homeschool policies include protections for high-needs and vulnerable children.** Twenty-one percent of homeschooled students have a parent-identified disability. The personalized nature of homeschooling can provide an environment specifically tailored to a child's unique needs. However, families may struggle to meet the educational (and other) needs of students with disabilities. Policymakers should consider ways to ensure that parents have access to service providers to help them meet their child's needs. Policies could connect homeschool families to private providers or include a provision that enables homeschooling parents to access support and resources from the local school district.

   In addition to protecting students with special needs, state policy must offer safeguards for children who are at risk of abuse or neglect. As noted above, 48 states lack even basic background check requirements for parents who choose to homeschool. While it is difficult to determine whether children who are homeschooled are at higher risk of abuse or neglect than those in traditional schools,[28] homeschooling can enable abusers to isolate their victims from other adults who might intervene in the situation. While this is not the case for the vast majority of homeschoolers, it is an issue that policymakers cannot overlook. Safeguards, such as requiring background checks of the adults in a homeschooling home, conducting risk assessments when parents begin to homeschool following a child abuse report, and requiring homeschooled children to have regular contact with mandatory reporters (e.g., through routine medical care) can help ensure children are homeschooled in safe environments.[29]

2. **Ensure alignment among statewide education policies to accommodate flexibility and choice.** Homeschooling is just one among many educational options available to families. Families likely move among these options as they seek to find the best fit for their children, as they move to new homes in new communities, or as other factors— such as a child's health or

[28] https://hsinvisiblechildren.org/

[29] https://responsiblehomeschooling.org/advocacy/policy/recommendations-and-model-legislation-at-risk-homeschooled-children/

special needs—evolve over time. Policymakers should design systems that make these transitions as smooth as possible. Enrollment and withdrawal policies, records transfer procedures, and clear and transparent criteria for grade placement and promotion are just some of the processes that can be streamlined to ensure that families can both access all educational options and make different educational decisions as their needs evolve.

3. **Establish data collection policies and procedures that, at a minimum, ensure policymakers know how many students are homeschooled statewide.** As discussed, the field lacks complete data on homeschooling. This makes it impossible to answer even the most basic questions about how many students are homeschooled nationally and in which states and communities the practice is most prevalent. This lack of information makes it difficult to create policies that support homeschooled students and their families. It is also problematic from a child welfare perspective, as schools do more than educate young people. Teachers and principals are mandated reporters and, as such, they provide an additional safety net for children who are at risk of abuse or neglect. Children who are homeschooled lack access to this additional safety net.

   It is incumbent on state policymakers to establish policies and procedures that, at an absolute minimum, require parents to annually notify the state or local school district of their intent to homeschool. Based on the needs of the students and families in their states, policymakers can choose to implement additional requirements that provide more and better information about homeschooled students, such as policies requiring parents to annually test students and report results to the state or local district, or policies that outline specific content that must be taught in homeschools. These policies can help stakeholders understand the outcomes of homeschooled students and how they compare to those who are educated in public or private schools. If state laws permit homeschool families to access sports, special education, or other services from the local school district, policymakers may want to consider tracking the number of students who are using those services in an effort to ensure districts are appropriately compensated for providing them.

   Given the widely differing perspectives on the role that the state can and should play in monitoring and collecting data on families who opt to homeschool, policymakers must carefully consider the needs of students and families in their states, and develop a policy framework and data collection approach that best meets those needs while ensuring all young people have access to a safe and quality learning environment.

Key Resources on Homeschooling

- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)
  - Homeschooling in the United States: Results from the 2012 and 2016 Parent and Family Involvement Survey.
  - Provides most recent data on homeschooling and parental involvement.
- Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE)
  - Advocacy organization for homeschooled children.
  - State by state overview of policies for homeschooling as well as policy briefs on a variety of related topics such as homeschool options, parental qualifications, and special needs students.
  - Overall policy recommendations.