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Homeschooling and Educational Freedom

Why School Choice Is Good for Homeschoolers

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Over the past 50 years, homeschooling has grown from a fringe act to a widely accepted education model reflective of a diverse American population. Many parents choose homeschooling to avoid the constraints of the conventional classroom and to embrace education in a broader, often more pluralistic way. Increasingly, homeschooling is driving education innovation, as entrepreneurial parents and educators create hybrid learning models that redefine and expand the homeschooling paradigm.

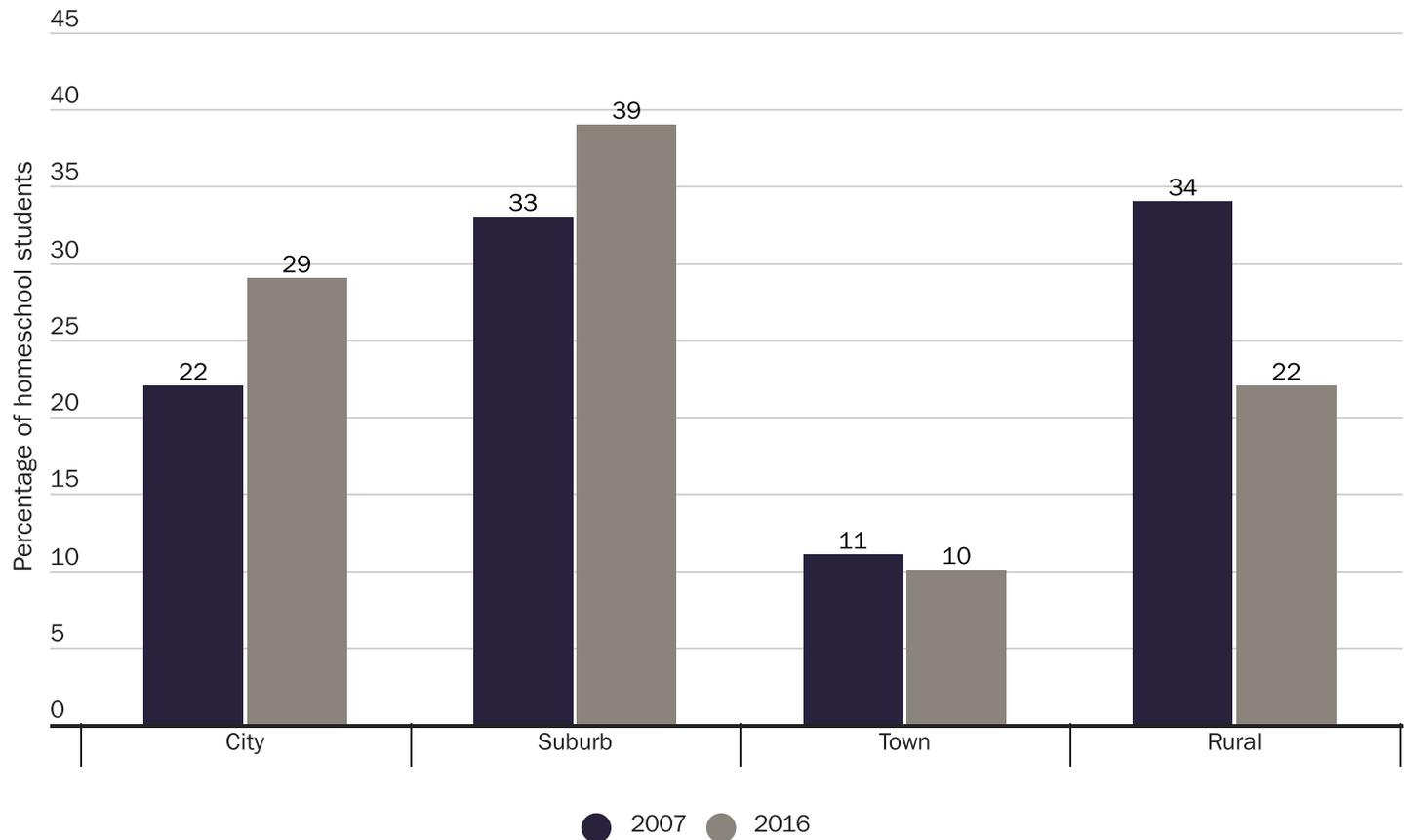
According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the U.S. homeschooling population more than doubled between 1999 and 2012, from 850,000 to 1.8 million children, or 3.4 percent of the K–12 student population.¹ Federal data show that the homeschooling population dipped slightly between 2012 and 2016, but state-level data reveal that some states with robust education choice programs saw rising numbers of homeschoolers during that time. Fluctuation in the homeschooling population is likely due to many factors, including regulatory changes that could make homeschooling either easier or more difficult for parents, but some homeschooling families may be taking advantage of school choice mechanisms, like education savings accounts (ESAs) and tax-credit scholarships. Even if they are not, an environment that supports educational freedom may encourage homeschooling growth.

This paper offers an overview of homeschooling trends and a glimpse at the current homeschooling population while arguing that educational freedom creates momentum for families to seek alternatives to conventional mass schooling. By expanding the definition of education and placing families in charge, education choice programs can empower parents, provide varied learning opportunities for young people, and stimulate education innovation and entrepreneurship. Despite legitimate fears of regulation, homeschoolers should generally support school choice proposals.

MODERN HOMESCHOOLING

Compulsory-schooling laws spread throughout the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and their grip became more far-reaching. As mandatory schooling extended earlier into childhood and later into adolescence for more of a child's day and year, the once widespread and accepted practice of homeschooling virtually disappeared. It reemerged in the early 1970s, when countercultural left “hippies” kept their children out of school and educated them at home or on back-to-the-land communes. While progressives may have launched the modern homeschooling movement, Christian conservatives expanded it. Seemingly disparate in their motivations, both groups rejected state-controlled,

Figure 1

Geographic distribution of homeschoolers, 2007 and 2016

Source: Sarah Grady and Stacey Bielick, *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993–2007* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2010); and Meghan McQuiggan and Mahi Megra, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

institutional schooling and sought a more personalized, child-centered approach to education. As education historian Milton Gaither wrote:

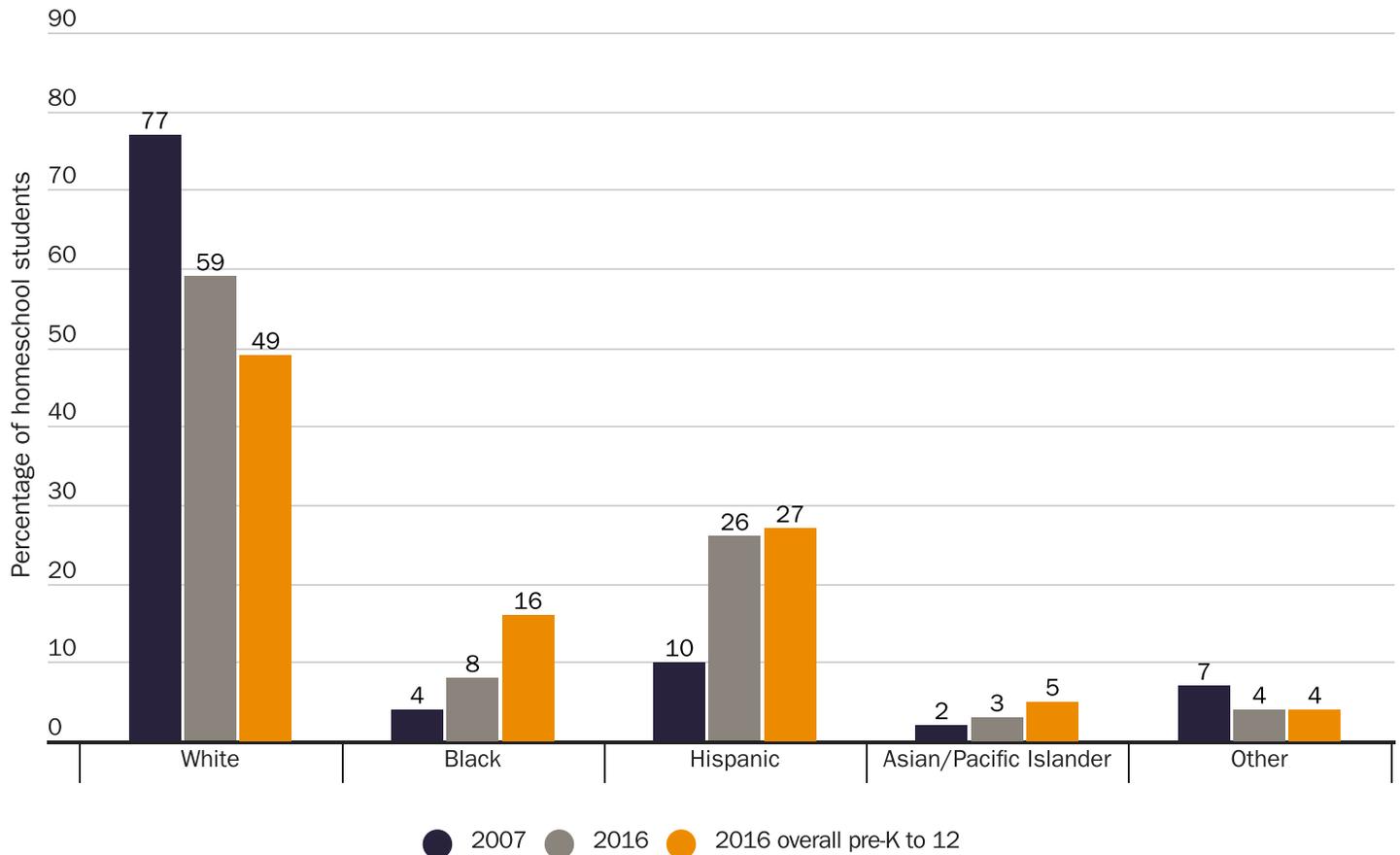
The progressive left had long harbored romantic ideals of child nature, born of Rousseau and come of age in the progressive education movement of the early twentieth century. Countercultural leftists inherited this outlook, and when they had children their instinct was to liberate the kids from what they took to be the deadening effects of institutionalization by keeping them at home. And the countercultural right, despite ostensibly conservative and biblical theological commitments, had basically the same view.²

During the 1980s and 1990s, the number of homeschoolers swelled, reaching 850,000 by 1999, the first year the Department of Education began tracking homeschooling data as part of its National Household Education Surveys

Program. Today, while religious homeschoolers remain a significant demographic, fewer families are choosing homeschooling for overtly religious reasons. By 2012, “concern about the environment of other schools” exceeded religious motivations as the primary catalyst for homeschooling.³

Over the past decade, homeschooling families have become much more reflective of the general U.S. population. The long-held stereotype of homeschooling families as white, middle-class, and Christian is changing. Homeschooling has become a mainstream option for many families who are fed up with increasingly standardized mass schooling. According to the *New York Times*, “Once mainly concentrated among religious families as well as parents who wanted to release their children from the strictures of traditional classrooms, home schooling is now attracting parents who want to escape the testing and curriculums that have come along with the Common Core, new academic standards that have been adopted by more than 40 states.”⁴ *Business Insider* went so far as to say that “homeschooling could be the smartest

Figure 2

Racial/ethnic shares of homeschoolers, 2007 and 2016, and ethnic shares of all students, 2016

Sources: Sarah Grady and Stacey Bielick, *Trends in the Use of School Choice: 1993–2007* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2010); Meghan McQuiggan and Mahi Megra, *Parent and Family Involvement in Education: Results from the National Household Education Surveys Program of 2016* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2017); and “Table 203.60. Enrollment and Percentage Distribution of Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Race/Ethnicity and Level of Education: Fall 1999 through Fall 2027,” *Digest of Education Statistics*, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, February 2018.

way to teach kids in the 21st century.”⁵

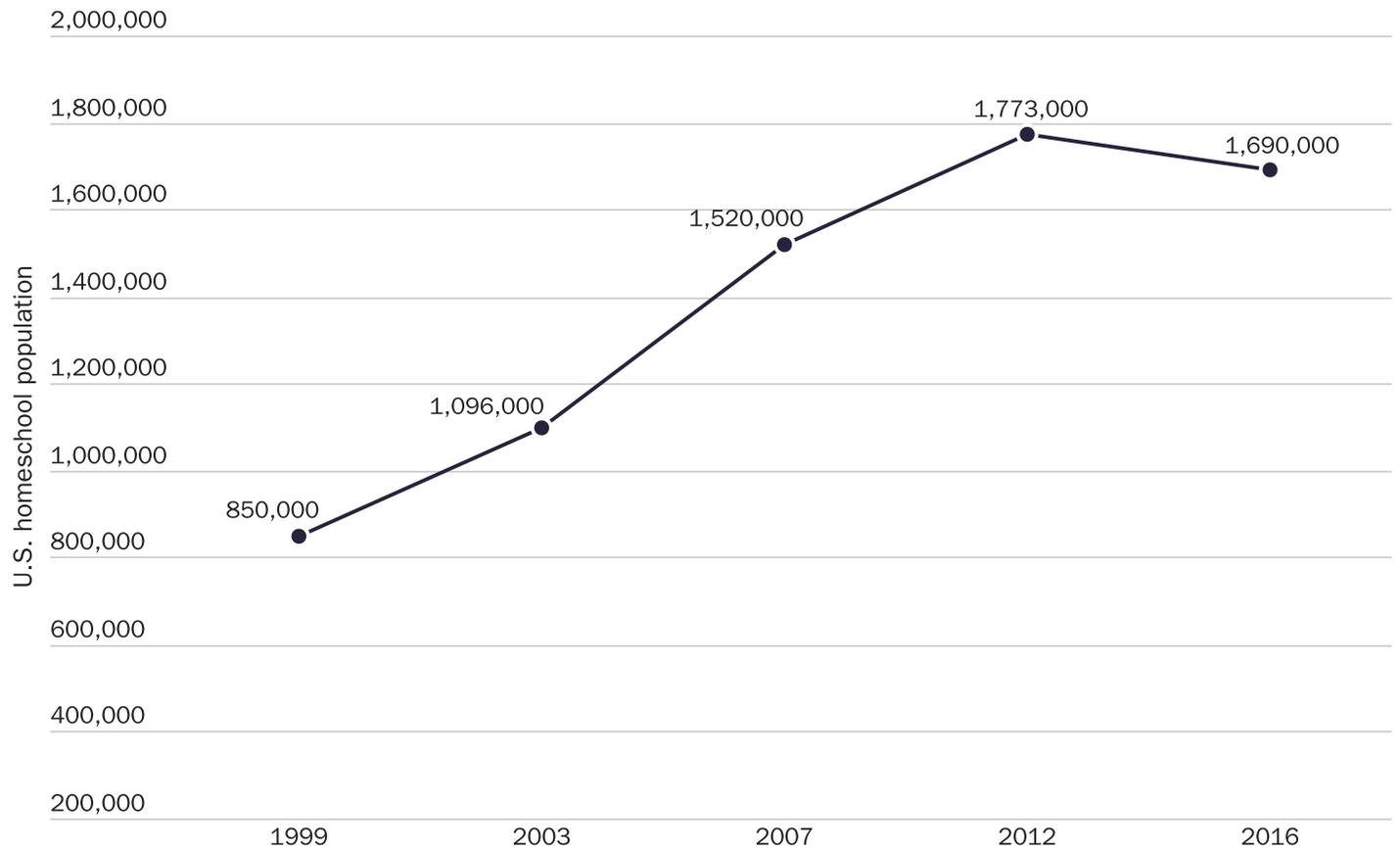
Homeschoolers have become more urban (Figure 1), secular, and socioeconomically diverse, and more single parents and dual-working parents have taken to homeschooling. But perhaps the most significant recent shift in the homeschooling population is its growing racial and ethnic diversity that is now more reflective of American society (Figure 2). Between 2007 and 2012, the percentage of black homeschoolers doubled to 8 percent of all homeschoolers, and the percentage of Hispanic homeschoolers continued to mirror the overall K–12 distribution of Hispanic children, at around one-quarter of all students.⁶

The dramatic rise in the number of black homeschoolers, in particular, may be a response to more black parents finding district school environments unsatisfactory. For instance, concerns about systemic racism, a culture of low expectations and poor academic outcomes for children of color, and a standardized curriculum that often ignores the history and

culture of black people have catalyzed much of the rise in the black homeschooling movement. *The Atlantic* reported in 2018 that for some black homeschoolers, “seizing control of their children’s schooling is an act of affirmation—a means of liberating themselves from the systemic racism embedded in so many of today’s schools and continuing the campaign for educational independence launched by their ancestors more than a century ago.”⁷

A more personalized, family-centered approach to education motivates many homeschoolers, but a key trend is using the legal designation of homeschooling to drive education innovation. Private learning centers and microschoools are increasingly establishing themselves as independent organizations, not government-licensed schools, that support families who are legally recognized as homeschoolers. This approach can accelerate experimentation and entrepreneurship by freeing enterprising educators from restrictive schooling regulations and state licensing and allowing

Figure 3

U.S. homeschooling population growth, 1999–2016

Source: Thomas D. Snyder, Cristobal de Brey, and Sally A. Dillow, *Digest of Education Statistics 2017: 53rd Edition* (Washington: U.S. Department of Education, 2019), p. 132.

families more flexibility. Many of these learning centers and microschoools let students attend several times a week, in some cases full time, enabling working parents, single parents, and others to register as homeschoolers and take advantage of versatile education models that stretch beyond conventional schooling.

WHERE HOMESCHOOLING IS GROWING

The homeschooling population has experienced an astonishing ascent over the past 20 years, but the latest federal data suggest that the rate of increase could be slowing, with homeschooling numbers leveling off. The Department of Education has historically tracked homeschooling through its National Household Education Survey, a randomized survey tool that in 2016 captured nationwide data on 14,075 school-age children, of which 552 were homeschoolers. The total number of homeschoolers declined slightly from about 1.8 million students in 2012, or 3.4 percent of the overall K–12 school-age population, to approximately 1.7 million students

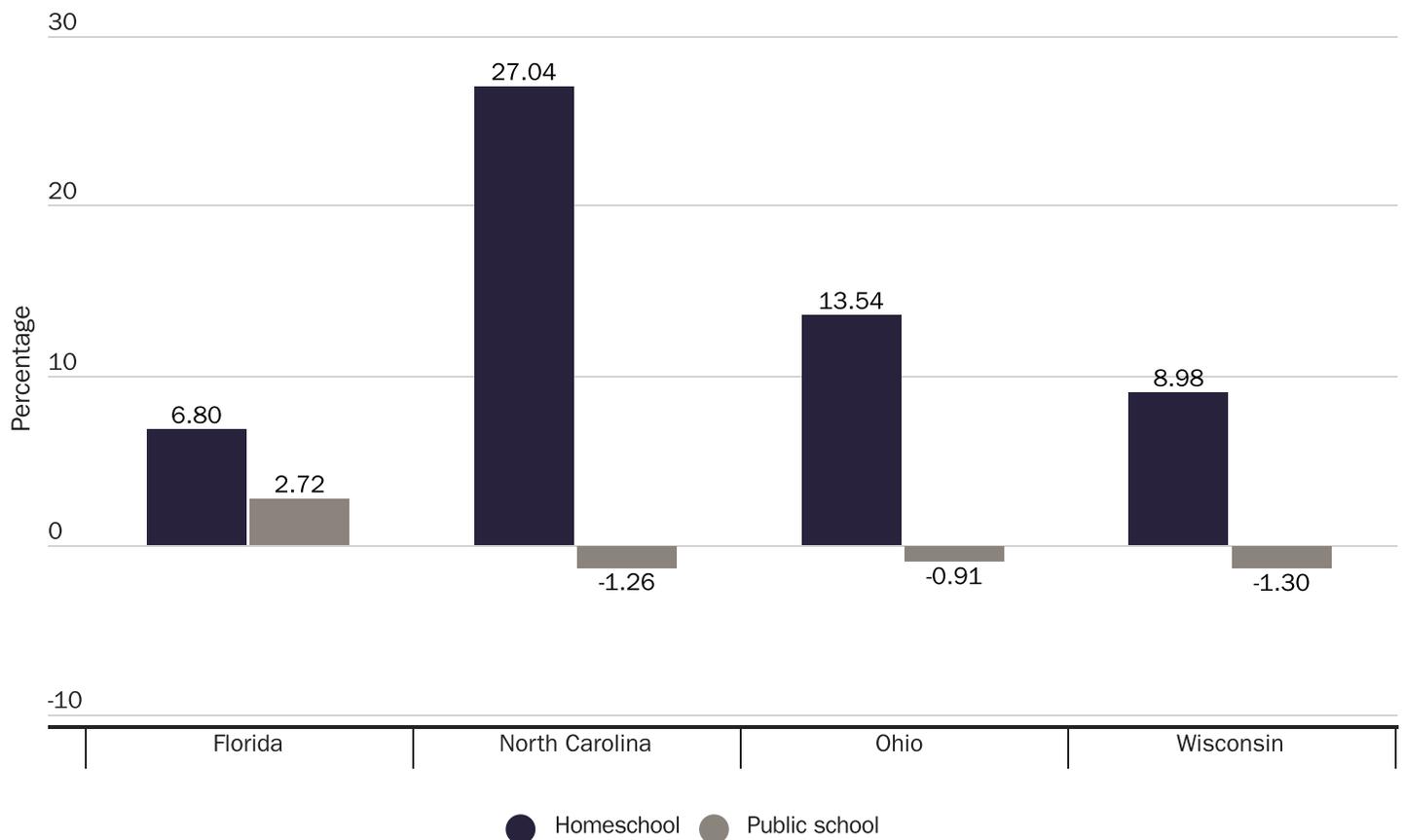
in 2016, or about 3.3 percent of all students.⁸

Given the relatively small sampling of homeschoolers and the potential aversion some homeschooling families express toward government data collection, it is possible this federal survey tool underestimates the overall homeschooling population. But while federal surveys show the homeschooling population is holding steady or slightly declining, some state data show states are experiencing notable growth in their homeschooling populations.

Many factors could be contributing to homeschooling expansion or decline in a given state, including satisfaction with local public school options, cost and availability of private schools, parents' job opportunities and economic prospects, demographic changes in the overall school-age population, changes in regulations or restrictions on homeschooling families, and availability of resources and support for homeschooling. Some research also suggests that the prevalence of public school choice programs, like charter schools, could reduce homeschooling by offering more "free" education options to parents and that vouchers might push more

Figure 4

Homeschooling population change vs. K–12 public school enrollment change in selected states with education choice, 2014–2015 and 2017–2018 academic years



Sources: Florida Department of Education, *Home Education in Florida: 2017–18 Annual Report* (Tallahassee, FL: Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice, 2018); “Student Enrollment,” Florida Department of Education, <https://edstats.fldoe.org/SASWebReportStudio/gotoReportSection.do?sectionNumber=1>; “Home School Statistics,” North Carolina Department of Administration; “Table 1—LEA Final Pupils by Grade,” North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, <http://apps.schools.nc.gov/ords/f?p=145:11:::NO>; “Home Schooling,” Ohio Department of Education; “Enrollment Data,” Ohio Department of Education; and “Home Based Private Instruction—Statistics,” Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.

homeschoolers into private schools.⁹

Certain states with robust private education choice programs, however, are seeing particularly high growth in homeschooling compared with overall public school enrollment. Florida, for example, is a leader in private education choice programs, offering an ESA, two tax-credit scholarship programs, and two voucher programs. The state has experienced a significant rise in homeschooling numbers over the past several years. The Florida homeschooling population grew 6.8 percent between the 2014–2015 and 2017–2018 school years, compared with only 2.7 percent growth in the state’s K–12 public school population during that same time.¹⁰

A similar story of homeschooling growth emerges in North Carolina, where the homeschooling population is rapidly expanding. Like Florida, North Carolina has favorable education choice policies, including an ESA and two voucher

programs. Between 2014 and 2018, the homeschooling population grew 27 percent to over 127,000 students, while K–12 public school enrollment fell by 1.3 percent.¹¹

Ohio offers five separate education voucher programs. There, the homeschooling population grew by over 13 percent to over 30,000 homeschoolers between 2014 and 2018, while the overall K–12 public school population fell by just under 1 percent.¹² The trend continues in Wisconsin, which offers four statewide voucher programs as well as a K–12 private school tuition tax deduction. Wisconsin public schools saw their enrollment drop by 1.3 percent between 2014 and 2018, while the homeschooling population grew by 9 percent.¹³

The most recent federal data on homeschooling, 2012 to 2016, show that the number of homeschoolers declined by 4.7 percent nationwide, while K–12 public school enrollment increased 1.6 percent.¹⁴ Why are states like Florida, North

Carolina, Wisconsin, and Ohio defying national homeschooling trends and dramatically outpacing K–12 public school enrollment? The availability of education choice programs in these states could offer some clues.

HOMESCHOOLING AND EDUCATION CHOICE PROGRAMS

States with successful education choice programs could be encouraging more homeschooling in a variety of ways, both practical and personal. At the practical level, some education choice programs, like ESAs, provide funds that families can use to purchase classes, supplies, curricula, and other resources, in addition to tuition. ESAs let parents opt out of public schools and public charter schools and access some public school funds through a government-authorized savings account. Unlike vouchers, these funds can be used for an array of education-related expenses, not just school tuition. ESAs help to disentangle education from schooling, acknowledging the wide variety of ways young people can and do learn.

According to a 2018 report by EdChoice, a nonprofit organization founded by Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman and his wife, Rose, to support education choice efforts, Florida's ESA program, known as the Gardiner Scholarship, has provided families of children with special needs access to education resources beyond schooling. Researchers Lindsey Burke and Jason Bedrick discovered that many of these ESA recipients were avoiding brick-and-mortar schooling altogether and using the ESA funds to fully customize their child's learning. Other recipients used the money for a blend of schooling and supplemental resources, while still others used the ESA like a voucher to pay for private school tuition.¹⁵ According to Burke and Bedrick, it's difficult to know for sure if the Florida ESA families who customized their child's education without schooling were registered homeschoolers, but it's quite likely that if students weren't attending a school, they were being homeschooled. Bedrick says some of the ESA families could have been registered with the Florida Virtual School, a leader in online K–12 learning, but he explains in an interview: "I expect that most of the students in that category would be registered as being home educated."¹⁶ ESAs could be supporting more homeschooling families in customizing their child's education.

Education choice programs could be encouraging more families to choose homeschooling by offering funding to those who want or need it. They also could be prompting

more homeschool resource centers to form, such as BigFish Learning Center, a self-directed learning community in Dover, New Hampshire, where some attendees take advantage of the state's tax-credit scholarship program to help defray enrollment expenses. New Hampshire's tax-credit scholarship program, which allows businesses or individuals to receive a tax credit when they donate to a scholarship-granting nonprofit organization, is currently the country's only tax-credit scholarship program open to homeschoolers, who can use scholarship funds for a variety of approved education expenses if they meet income eligibility requirements.

There also may be more personal reasons why states with flourishing education choice programs have a growing homeschooling population. If everyone in your neighborhood attends an assigned district school, it can be difficult to go against the grain. In an environment of educational choice, where alternatives are available, valued, and sought after, pursuing a different education path may seem more normal. Homeschooling becomes one of many viable education choices, and the more homeschoolers there are, the more likely other families will be to explore this option. This peer effect could be large in states that enact strong choice programs. A growing homeschooling population leads to more local resources for homeschoolers, such as more classes offered by local businesses, museums, and libraries, and may spark more private learning centers and parent-led co-ops to emerge. These resources, in turn, could be encouraging more families to pursue homeschooling.

Even in states like Wisconsin and Ohio that have voucher programs for private school tuition, but not ESAs or funds specifically for homeschooling, a climate of education choice could be influencing more families to choose homeschooling. Indeed, the growth in homeschooling in Wisconsin and Ohio, where public school enrollment declined, could indicate that when there is more education choice, more parents will make more choices. Even when they don't directly benefit from a state choice program, like a voucher, the mere presence of mechanisms that empower some parents to take control of their child's education may prompt more parents to do so. This is an important policy point for homeschooling advocates who oppose education choice programs that would include homeschoolers out of concern that such programs could lead to greater homeschooling regulation or oversight, which is a legitimate possibility. Homeschoolers should support education choice programs, whether or not they are personally included in such programs, because more choice can lead to more homeschoolers overall.

HOW HOMESCHOOLING CAN DRIVE EDUCATION INNOVATION

In his influential 1955 paper popularizing the idea of vouchers, Milton Friedman explained how more education choice would break the government monopoly on schooling and lead to more diverse options and innovation. He wrote:

The result of these measures would be a sizable reduction in the direct activities of government, yet a great widening in the educational opportunities open to our children. They would bring a healthy increase in the variety of educational institutions available and in competition among them. Private initiative and enterprise would quicken the pace of progress in this area as it has in so many others. Government would serve its proper function of improving the operation of the invisible hand without substituting the dead hand of bureaucracy.¹⁷

By shifting power to families, education choice creates greater variety in how young people learn and triggers education entrepreneurship and experimentation. With its legal flexibility, homeschooling provides an ideal incubator for educational ingenuity.

In Nashville, Tennessee, for instance, two schools that focus on homeschoolers recently opened. Acton Academy Nashville is a hybrid homeschooling model in which students attend the school three days a week, and the Nashville Sudbury School offers students a full-time school track or a flexible homeschool track. Tuition at both schools is a fraction of the cost of other local private schools, and they share a commitment to student-directed, passion-driven learning. At Nashville Sudbury, more than half of the current students are registered homeschoolers. According to Sonia Fernandez LeBlanc, one of the founders of the Nashville Sudbury School: “Families love the flexibility that the homeschooling track allows and most take advantage of more than two days a week.” She adds: “We have a very eclectic homeschooling community in the greater Nashville area.”¹⁸

In California, Da Vinci Connect is a publicly funded, privately operated hybrid K–12 charter school network for homeschoolers where children attend the project-based school two days a week and spend the rest of the time at home and throughout their community. According to a recent *Forbes* article about the Da Vinci network: “Despite what one might consider a common homeschool family unit (two parents and one who is able to not work and stay

at home), many Da Vinci Connect families do not fit that mold and are finding unique ways to make the homeschool option work for them.”¹⁹

As its population becomes more diverse, and as its versatility attracts both parents and entrepreneurs, homeschooling will likely continue to drive innovation—particularly in states supportive of education choice.

CONCLUSION

In just 50 years, the modern homeschooling movement has evolved from a smattering of ideologues to a widespread educational option for many families. Today’s homeschoolers increasingly mirror the larger American population and often use the legal designation of homeschooling to create a more personalized, child-directed approach to learning than is possible through the dominant compulsory-schooling model. While recent national data suggest homeschooling growth may be slowing, state-level data suggest that in some states with particularly favorable education choice programs, the homeschooling population is soaring many times faster than the K–12 public school population.

Education choice through ESAs, tax-credit scholarships, and vouchers is beneficial and gives families options. But it may also be good for homeschoolers and others who value educational freedom and change. An environment that supports choice empowers parents to take control of their child’s education, whether or not that child is the recipient of any specific education choice funding. A climate of choice can lead more families to explore alternatives to conventional schooling and inspire entrepreneurial educators to establish new, more flexible models of learning that are better aligned with the realities of the 21st century.

In his book *Instead of Education*, homeschooling pioneer John Holt wrote: “You cannot have human liberty, and the sense of all persons’ uniqueness, dignity, and worth on which it must rest, if you give to some people the right to tell other people what they must learn or know, or the right to say officially and ‘objectively’ that some people are more able and worthy than others.”²⁰ The promise of education choice is that families are free to opt out of compulsory mass schooling that dictates what all young people must learn and know and that officially judges them on their worth. Fortunately, U.S. homeschoolers have been free to do this legally for over 25 years, and they may very well be the ones best positioned to extend this educational liberty to others by supporting choice for all families.

NOTES

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9. Corey A. DeAngelis and Angela K. Dills, “Is School Choice a ‘Trojan Horse?’ The Effects of School Choice Laws on Home-school Prevalence,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 94, no. 3 (2019): pp. 342–54.
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12. “Home Schooling,” Ohio Department of Education; and “Enrollment Data,” Ohio Department of Education.
13. “Home Based Private Instruction—Statistics,” Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction.
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17. Milton Friedman, “The Role of Government in Education,” *Economics and the Public Interest*, ed. Robert A. Solo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1955), pp. 123–44.
18. Sonia Fernandez LeBlanc, “Nashville Sudbury School response,” email correspondence received by Kerry McDonald, January 26, 2019.
19. Tom Vander Ark, “Da Vinci Schools Expand Opportunities in Los Angeles,” *Forbes*, November 2, 2018.
20. John Holt, *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better* (Medford, MA: Holt Associates, 2004), pp. 8–9.