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Who Homeschools and What Does 'Success' Mean to Them? Experimental Evidence from a National Sample

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Abstract:

The U.S. homeschool population is of similar magnitude to the private and charter sectors. It is also growing and diversifying, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite recent growth, little is known about parents who choose to homeschool their children today. Even less is known about why parents choose this type of education. Parental attitudes and perspectives of student "success" will likely drive their educational choices, whether residentially assigned district public schools, alternative public schools, private schools, or homeschooling. However, little research has examined the importance of these attitudes on choice. In this study, we conducted a survey experiment of parent perspectives on student success, focusing on the homeschooling population. We use a fully randomized stated preferences experiment known as a conjoint experiment embedded in a nationally representative survey to evaluate these perspectives across five components, including standardized test scores, college matriculation, civic outcomes, academic skills, and religiosity. We also collect parental characteristic information, facilitating a comparison of today's homeschooling parents and their other education sector peers. We find that homeschool parents look much like their other education-sector peers on various characteristics. We also find that homeschool parents value academic outcomes similarly to their non-homeschooling peers. This study adds to the existing knowledge with some of the only post-pandemic homeschool demographic data currently available and uses the most rigorous methods in homeschool research to date.

Keywords: School choice, public school choice, private school choice, homeschooling, randomized controlled trial

Who Homeschools and What Does 'Success' Mean to Them: Experimental Evidence from a National Sample

Parental attitudes and perspectives of student "success" will likely drive their educational choices, whether residentially assigned district public schools, alternative public schools, private schools, or homeschooling. However, little research has examined the importance of these attitudes on choice, particularly in the homeschool population. In this study, we conducted a survey experiment of parent perspectives on student success. We use a fully randomized stated preferences experiment known as a conjoint experiment to evaluate these perspectives across five components, including standardized test scores, college matriculation, civic outcomes, academic skills, and religiosity. We compare homeschool parent perspectives to those of their non-homeschooling peers.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, nationally representative data on homeschooled families is limited. This sample provides new and timely information on today's homeschool population demographics, several years after the pandemic, and when the future of other federal data sources, which make up the bulk of what is known about this group, is unclear. The value of these data is clear because of the limited information available on homeschooling and our limited understanding of this population, alongside continued growth (Watson, 2024a) in this sector.

Second, this is the only paper, to our knowledge, to use conjoint analysis to produce plausibly causal estimates of stated preferences and then to compare those findings across sectors with a focus on homeschooling, thus providing some of the most rigorous evidence on homeschooling to date. Finally, we can see the variation in parental preference across sectors, comparing the preferences of homeschool parents to those of their peers in other education sectors. The evidence presented here provides a never-before-seen view of the American homeschool parent, what they value in education, and how those values compare to other parents.

We find that standardized test scores, college matriculation, and civic outcomes matter most to parents, but academic skills and religiosity also matter. These findings hold for parents who homeschool, with slight variations noted. In addition, we find limited evidence of heterogeneity in marginal means across subgroups, with homeschooling parents slightly favoring active civic and religious involvement.

The paper proceeds with a summary of the literature related to our research questions and a detailed consideration of the descriptive statistics to understand this population better. Next, we describe our survey and analytic strategy. Then we discuss our findings and conclude with a discussion of the limitations and directions for future work.

Review of Literature

Homeschooling, a fixture in the contemporary U.S. educational landscape (Cheng & Hamlin, 2023), grew rapidly during the pandemic-induced disruptions of 2020 (Smith & Watson, 2024) despite some calls for restrictions (Bartholet, 2020; Wolf, Lee & Watson, 2020). In 2019, homeschool participation was almost 3 percent (Hanson & Pugliese, 2019; Hudson et al., 2023). By the fall of 2020, at the height of the pandemic, the percentage of families identifying as homeschooling increased to 11 percent (US Census Bureau, 2021). In 2023 and 2024, multiple sources indicated that the average national homeschool participation rate had settled to about 6 percent of K-12 students (Watson, 2023; NCES, 2024; Smith & Watson, 2024a; Smith & Watson, 2024b). Given that 9 percent of students enrolled in private schools and 7 percent of students enrolled in charter schools during those same years, homeschooling students and families represent a substantial portion of the fabric of American K-12 education (Watson, 2023; Smith & Watson, 2024a, 2024b)

Historically, homeschool has been loosely defined as the parent-directed education of a child in the home (Watson, 2023), with variation in that definition depending on the source. Over time, however, that definition has become misaligned with the actual practice, with homeschooling families opting to participate in co-ops and hybrid schools (Thompson, Lee & Wearne, 2024), and even forming pandemic pods (Horn, 2020; Watson, 2020) and microschools. Recent evidence indicates that as few as 10 percent of homeschooled students were educated at home for their academic careers (Cheng, 2024). Today, some people who identify as homeschoolers do so as part of online virtual schools, charter schools, and even enroll part-time in public schools. Similarly, homeschooling families now qualify for public funding in more states, further incentivizing and removing barriers to entry for new families.

Despite recent growth that likely expands homeschool population diversity (Bjorklund-Young & Watson, 2024), many homeschool policies are based on stereotypes from decades ago about who homeschools and why (Watson, 2025). Without evidence to the contrary, flawed stereotypes remain unchallenged, leading to potentially flawed policy.

Historically, most data on the homeschool population in the United States came from nationally representative federal surveys. One such survey was the National Household Education Survey (NHES), administered about every two years (NCES, 2024). This survey captured information on homeschool parent characteristics and their reasons for homeschooling. The 2023 NHES was set to provide the first post-pandemic look at homeschool participation (NCES, 2024). This information is particularly important given the significant growth in the homeschool sector during that time. While the data collection and preliminary analysis of the NHES was completed in 2024, the data have not yet been released as of this writing and may never be released. As a result, current data that contain homeschooling information are limited.

Nevertheless, other accounts of both historical and modern homeschool participation exist. For example, about half of all states collect and report annual homeschool participation data (Watson, 2023). Some states also report data disaggregated by county or district, student age or grade, and gender. However, only one state reports homeschool participation information by race (Watson,

2023, Delaware). While an incomplete picture of national participation, these limited data do provide much-needed information about who homeschools and where.

The U.S. Census also began conducting the Household Pulse Survey (Pulse) at the pandemic's beginning (Eggleston & Fields, 2021). These nationally representative surveys continued, about monthly, through the fall of 2024, and captured the self-reported educational practices of respondents, including whether they homeschooled a child in their family (Watson, 2023, Pulse page). Data from these surveys also contain a robust suite of respondent demographic characteristics and state-level information. Thus, the Pulse data provided some of the most detailed information on the homeschooling population. However, while there was a planned revision of this survey in the early spring of 2025, policy changes leave the future of this survey uncertain.

While imperfect, these surveys provided much-needed information about the homeschooled population. Analysis of this information proved instrumental in dismantling false stereotypes and widely held misunderstandings of homeschooling. For example, the common stereotype is that homeschooling is a majority white ideologically driven pursuit, that the homeschooling population is monolithic, and homeschoolers are drastically different from their peers in other education sectors (Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Bartholet, 2020). However, recent research using federal surveys indicates that few homeschool students were homeschooled for most of their academic careers, a finding that challenges the theory that ideology drives motivation (Cheng, 2024; Cheng & Watson, 2025). Indeed, most adults who reported being homeschooled were only homeschooled for one to three years (Cheng, 2024). Similarly, while multiple data sources find that most homeschoolers are white (Bjorklund-Young & Watson, 2024), that is because most of the population identifies as white. Relatedly, these data indicate that today's homeschooling population is quite diverse and looks much like the broader society (Cheng & Hamlin, 2023; Smith & Watson, 2024a and b; Bjorklund-Young & Watson, 2024; Cheng & Watson, 2025).

Flawed stereotypes matter because when allowed to stand unchallenged, they can create bias, impacting public perception of homeschooling. Stereotypes may also disenfranchise populations who think that homeschooling is not an option for them because they do not fit the common stereotypes of who and what homeschoolers are. Without data and information, policymakers create and uphold flawed policies, based on chronic misunderstandings of this education sector. These issues are further exacerbated by the recent and continued growth of homeschooling and the increased innovation and creation of homeschool-adjacent models like hybrid schools and microschools, often legally counted as homeschools.

While data are important for understanding the population, it can also help us understand motivation. Why do these families choose to homeschool, and what do they value in education? Some evidence about what homeschool families view as successful educational outcomes does exist. Some theorize that homeschooling families have unconventional values and other varied motivations (Tilhou, 2020) such as dissatisfaction with public schools (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020) and that these motivations likely vary by individual characteristics (Hirsch, 2019; Ali-Coleman & Khadijah, 2022; Batts et al., 2024; Johnson, 2024) and even region (Baker, 2024).

However, there is some evidence in the literature about what families, society, and the education establishment view as success.

Test scores became the gold standard of the accountability movement reforms. However, parents and teachers alike have pushed back on the importance placed on test scores, citing that they should not be the primary goal of education and may not be a good measure of actual academic skills (Levin, 2012). Similarly, while college-going, particularly to four-year institutions, has been the widely held goal for traditional education (Oreopoulus & Petronijevic, 2013), there is renewed interest by many to prepare students for career and college and to affirm two-year programs and community colleges as legitimate alternatives to a successful education. Further, others cite the importance of things outside the four Rs as important outcomes of education, such as preparing students to be active members of society through civic (Fitzgerald et al., 2021) and religious engagement.

Despite growth and increased interest in the homeschool population, data are increasingly scarce, and rigorous research evidence is limited. Without conclusive evidence, stereotypes about who chooses to homeschool their children persist. Even less is understood about why families choose to homeschool. In this study, we add to the literature by surveying a nationally representative sample of parents. We gather information on parent, student, and family characteristics, political and religious leanings, civic engagement, and school sector participation. Thus, this study provides a more detailed and nuanced picture of today's homeschoolers, why they choose homeschooling, and what they prioritize as success in education.

Survey and Data

Our data come from a nationally representative sample of parents, collected in partnership with EdChoice and Morning Consult in the spring of 2024. Altogether, 3,191 parents completed the survey, a nationally representative sample when accounting for analytic weights. The response rate was 42 percent. In Table 1, these parents have 5,167 school-aged children in kindergarten through 12th grade. Almost 250 were homeschooling a child. While this sample may seem small, comparable samples of the homeschooled population in other surveys are similarly low and frequently generalized to the larger population (Hudson et al., 2023). Similarly, the respondents from other sectors are limited, with 320 in charters or intradistrict and 288 in private schools.

Homeschooling parents exhibit some differences in observable characteristics compared to the general population of K-12 parents. By parents' ethnicity, whites are overrepresented, and minorities are underrepresented among homeschooling families. Sixty-nine percent of homeschool parents identified as white (relative to 56 percent of all parents in our sample, though a substantial proportion of Hispanic (15 percent vs. 22 percent overall) and Black families (10 percent vs. 12 percent) choose to homeschool.

Table 1. Parent respondent descriptive statistics

	Overall		Any Homeschool	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
	(1)	*(2)*	(3)	*(4)*
Number of K12 children	1.60	*0.81*	1.77	*1.14*
Female	0.54	*0.50*	0.60	*0.49*
Ethnicity: White	0.56	*0.50*	0.69	*0.46*
Ethnicity: Hispanic	0.22	*0.41*	0.15	*0.35*
Ethnicity: Black	0.12	*0.33*	0.10	*0.31*
Ethnicity: Asian	0.09	*0.28*	0.05	*0.21*
Ethnicity: Native American	0.02	*0.14*	0.01	*0.10*
Generation: Gen Z	0.05	*0.21*	0.05	*0.21*
Generation: Millennial	0.55	*0.50*	0.52	*0.50*
Generation: Gen X	0.38	*0.48*	0.41	*0.49*
Generation: Boomer	0.03	*0.16*	0.03	*0.17*
Married	0.59	*0.49*	0.60	*0.49*
Locale: Urban	0.33	*0.47*	0.24	*0.43*
Locale: Suburban	0.43	*0.50*	0.41	*0.49*
Locale: Small Town	0.09	*0.29*	0.11	*0.31*
Locale: Rural	0.15	*0.35*	0.25	*0.43*
Household Income: < $50k	0.36	*0.48*	0.46	*0.50*
Household Income: $50k to $100k	0.36	*0.48*	0.36	*0.48*
Household Income: > $100k	0.28	*0.45*	0.18	*0.38*
Region: Northeast	0.17	*0.37*	0.13	*0.34*
Region: Midwest	0.21	*0.41*	0.23	*0.42*
Region: South	0.38	*0.49*	0.40	*0.49*
Region: West	0.24	*0.43*	0.24	*0.43*
Education: < Bachelor's	0.60	*0.49*	0.67	*0.47*
Education: Bachelor's +	0.40	*0.49*	0.33	*0.47*
Political Party: Democrat	0.37	*0.48*	0.29	*0.46*
Political Party: Independent	0.27	*0.44*	0.27	*0.45*
Political Party: Republican	0.36	*0.48*	0.44	*0.50*
Political Views: Liberal	0.29	*0.45*	0.25	*0.43*

Political Views: Moderate	0.39	*0.49*	0.32	*0.47*
Political Views: Conservative	0.32	*0.47*	0.43	*0.50*
Relig. Service Attendance: Weekly +	0.33	*0.47*	0.44	*0.50*
Relig. Service Attendance: < Weekly	0.38	*0.48*	0.25	*0.44*
Relig. Service Attendance: Never	0.30	*0.46*	0.31	*0.46*
Any TPS	0.77	*0.42*	0.21	*0.41*
Any public choice	0.12	*0.33*	0.06	*0.23*
Any private	0.11	*0.32*	0.07	*0.25*
Any homeschool	0.07	*0.26*		
n	3,191		249	

Notes. All statistics reported as proportions (0-1) except for number of K-12 children currently living at home (range: 1-7). Overall sample descriptive statistics are reported in columns (1) and (2). Conditional statistics are reported for parents with at least one homeschooler in columns (3) and (4).

Homeschool families are less likely in urban settings (24 percent vs. 33 percent) and more likely in rural settings (25 percent vs. 15 percent). However, a similar proportion of suburban (41 percent vs. 43 percent) and small-town families (11 percent vs. 9 percent) choose to homeschool. On average, homeschool parents have lower household income (46 percent less than $50,000 per year vs. 36 percent) and educational attainment (67 percent < a Bachelor's vs. 60 percent).

Homeschool parents are more likely to be Republican (44 percent vs. 36 percent) and conservative (43 percent vs. 32 percent). However, a substantial proportion of homeschooling parents identify as Democrats (29 percent), independents (27 percent), liberals (25 percent), and moderates (32 percent). Finally, homeschooling parents are more likely to attend religious services (44 percent vs. 33 percent). However, a similar proportion of homeschooling parents never attend religious services (31 percent) as the general population (30 percent).

Homeschooling families are similar to the general population concerning other characteristics. Parents are similarly distributed across generations, with the Millennials being the most common for both homeschool families (52 percent) and our overall sample (55 percent). Homeschool parents are married at similar rates (60 percent) to our overall sample (59 percent) and have similar family sizes, with 1.7 K-12 children currently living in homeschooling households, compared to 1.6 for non-homeschooling families. Families are similarly distributed by region.

We present student-level descriptive statistics in Table 2. The 3,191 parent respondents reported having 5,167 K-12 students living in their households. Of these students, 328 are homeschooled (a weighted 5.7 percent), and 443 are in a household with at least one homeschooled child (a weighted 7.9 percent). Most homeschooled students are full-time (71 percent), while 18 percent are in a cooperative, 8 percent in a hybrid school, and 3 percent are homeschooled elsewhere.

At the student level, 73 percent of the K-12 student population are enrolled in a residentially assigned district public school (TPS), 11 percent are in a school of choice (including intradistrict and public charter schools), 10 percent are in a private school, and 6 percent are homeschooled.

Table 2. Student descriptive statistics

	All Students	Homeschool Households	Homeschool Students
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Female	0.48	0.51	0.53
Sector: Public charter	0.05	0.04	
Sector: Homeschool	0.06	0.72	
Sector: Private school	0.10	0.05	
Sector: District public	0.73	0.17	
Sector: Intradistrict choice	0.06	0.01	
Homeschool Type: Full-time			0.71
Homeschool Type: Co-op			0.18
Homeschool Type: Hybrid			0.08
Homeschool Type: Other			0.03
Grade: Kindergarten	0.11	0.10	0.12
Grade: 1st	0.06	0.06	0.04
Grade: 2nd	0.07	0.06	0.07
Grade: 3rd	0.07	0.06	0.06
Grade: 4th	0.07	0.06	0.06
Grade: 5th	0.08	0.10	0.08
Grade: 6th	0.07	0.05	0.05
Grade: 7th	0.08	0.10	0.11
Grade: 8th	0.08	0.08	0.08
Grade: 9th	0.09	0.12	0.13
Grade: 10th	0.08	0.07	0.07
Grade: 11th	0.08	0.09	0.11
Grade: 12th	0.06	0.05	0.04
n	5,167	443	328
Weighted %	100.0%	7.9%	5.7%

Notes. All statistics reported as proportions (0-1). Descriptive statistics for all students reported in column (1). Descriptive statistics for students in a household with at least one homeschooled child reported in column (2). Descriptive statistics for homeschooled students reported in column (3).

Similarly, only 71 percent of those homeschooled are full-time, with the remaining students distributed across co-ops, hybrid schools, and other options. Students are equally distributed across all grades, with some concentrations of homeschooled students appearing in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades, likely because those are transitional grades between junior high, high school, and the year prior to graduation.

Table 3. Household descriptive statistics

	All Students	Homeschool Households	Homeschool Students
	(1)	(2)	(3)
All children enrolled in:			
District public	0.68	0	0
Intradistrict choice	0.04	0	0
Public charter	0.03	0	0
Private school	0.07	0	0
Homeschool	0.04	0.56	0.77
Public	0.76	0	0
Private or homeschool	0.12	0.56	0.77
Choice	0.19	0.56	0.77
Any child enrolled in:			
TPS	0.78	0.35	0.18
Intradistrict	0.08	0.03	0.01
Charter	0.07	0.09	0.04
Private	0.13	0.13	0.06
Homeschool	0.08	1.00	1.00
Public	0.87	0.38	0.20
Home or private	0.20	1	1
Choice	0.31	1	1
Public choice	0.14	0.12	0.05
n	5,167	443	328
Weighted %	100.0%	7.9%	5.7%

Notes. All statistics reported as proportions (0-1). Descriptive statistics for all students reported in column (1). Descriptive statistics for students in a household with at least one homeschooled child reported in column (2). Descriptive statistics for homeschooled students reported in column (3).

Finally, we present household-level descriptive statistics in Table 3. Seventy-six percent of all students are in a household that exclusively uses public schooling options, whether residentially assigned district public school (68 percent), intradistrict choice (4 percent), or public charter school (3 percent). Twelve percent of all students are in a household that exclusively uses private schooling options, whether a conventional private school (7 percent) or homeschool (4 percent). The remaining 12 percent of students are in households using a combination of public and private options.

The vast majority of households (87 percent) have at least one child in a public option. However, a substantial proportion of households (20 percent) have at least one child in a private option, whether conventional private (13 percent) or homeschool (8 percent). Twenty percent of all homeschool students have at least one sibling enrolled in a public option, and 6 percent have at least one sibling enrolled in a conventional private school.

Methods

To understand the pedagogical priorities of homeschool parents, we embedded a fully randomized stated preferences experiment known as a conjoint experiment into our survey. In a conjoint experiment, respondents are presented with consecutive sets of hypothetical options with randomly assigned attributes and asked to select their preferred option within the set.

In our survey experiment, we presented parents with 6 sets of 12 hypothetical graduates and asked the parent to identify the most "successful" graduate within each set. Hypothetical graduates were randomly assigned attributes across 5 components and answer choices: standardized test scores (below average, average, or above average), college matriculation (not pursuing college education, accepted to a university, or accepted to a prestigious university), civic outcomes (not involved in community, involved in community, or actively involved in community), academic skills (average literacy and numeracy skills, strong literacy skills, strong numeracy skills, or strong literacy and numeracy skills), and religiosity (not religious, nominally religious, involved in a religious community, or actively involved in a religious community). See Table 4 for details. In each set, parent respondents identified either of the 2 graduates as "successful" or chose neither. Overall, homeschool parents identified a graduate as "successful" in 86 percent of all sets, and non-homeschool parents identified a graduate as "successful" in 90 percent of all sets.

Table 4. Stated preferences experiment design

Components	Levels
(1)	(2)
Standardized Test Score	Below-average test scores
	Average test scores
	Above-average test scores
College Matriculation	Not pursuing a college education
	Accepted to a university
	Accepted to a prestigious university
Civic Outcomes	Not involved in the community
	Involved in the community
	Actively involved in the community
Academic Skills	Average literacy and numeracy skills

	Strong literacy skills
	Strong numeracy skills
	Strong literacy and numeracy skills
Religiosity	Not religious
	Nominally religious
	Involved in a religious community
	Actively involved in a religious community

A fully-randomized stated preferences experiment, also known as a conjoint experiment, has been widely used in political science and marketing (Leeper et al., 2020). Because attributes are randomly assigned, this analytic strategy aids in understanding respondent preferences in multidimensional contexts, allowing for causal inference in a respondent's likelihood of choosing across products, candidates, or other options. As such, it can also be helpful for understanding parental preference in contexts of educational choice. For example, a study of parental preference in private religious schools determined that parents value spiritual formation and academic quality above extracurricular offerings and tuition (Lee et al., 2024; Thompson, Lee & Wearne, 2024). This strategy has also been used in other education contexts, such as to understand administrator preferences for teacher hiring (Giersch & Dong, 2018; Johnson et al., 2024), students' persistence in higher education settings (Azarcon et al., 2014), and student learning prioritized by leaders in developing countries (Crawfurd et al., 2021).

In this study, we leveraged a conjoint experiment to estimate the effect of each randomly assigned attribute set on the likelihood that a parent would identify the hypothetical high school graduate as successful using the following random effects model:

$$success_{qrs} = \beta_0 + \boldsymbol{\tau}'\beta + \boldsymbol{\mu}'\beta + \boldsymbol{\kappa}'\beta + \boldsymbol{\alpha}'\beta + \boldsymbol{\rho}'\beta + \epsilon_r$$

in which $success_{qrs}$ takes a value of 1 if a hypothetical graduate q presented to respondent r in set s was identified as successful and 0 otherwise, $\boldsymbol{\tau}$ is a vector of indicator variables for standardized test score outcomes, $\boldsymbol{\mu}$ is a vector of indicator variables for college matriculation, $\boldsymbol{\kappa}$ is a vector of indicator variables for civic outcomes, $\boldsymbol{\alpha}$ is a vector of indicator variables for academic skills, and $\boldsymbol{\rho}$ is a vector of indicator variables for religiosity. Standard errors are clustered by respondent. Because levels are randomly assigned, we are able to estimate average marginal component effects (AMCEs) of each level on the likelihood that a respondent would identify a hypothetical graduate as "successful" (Leeper et al., 2020). This analysis presents results for homeschooling parents compared to their non-homeschooling peers.

Results

In Table 5, we begin by considering AMCEs from the conjoint analysis on parents' stated preferences about their perceptions of elements and characteristics of a successful education and how those preferences may vary by education sector.

Standardized test score performance produced the largest effect sizes. Relative to hypothetical graduates with "below average" test scores, all respondents were more likely to identify a graduate with "average" test scores (16 percentage points) or a graduate with "above average" scores (21pp) as successful. Concerning college matriculation, relative to hypothetical graduates

not pursuing college or university education, respondents were more likely to identify students who had been accepted to college or university (14pp) or accepted to a prestigious college or university (16pp) as successful, with homeschooling parents less likely to value college in general (10pp) and much less likely to value prestigious college acceptance (6pp).

Civic outcomes produced effect sizes of similar magnitude, with graduates involved in their community (13pp) or actively involved in their community (14pp) more likely to be identified as successful relative to graduates not involved in their community. Homeschool parents also valued community involvement (10pp) but preferred active involvement (16pp).

Academic skills and religiosity produced effect sizes of smaller magnitude. Relative to a graduate with average literacy and numeracy skills, graduates with strong literacy skills (7pp), strong numeracy skills (6pp), or both (10pp) were more likely to be chosen as the successful graduate within a set. Homeschool respondents placed similar value on academic skills, with slightly less value for numeracy (4pp) and a preference for both (12pp).

Finally, concerning religiosity, graduates who were nominally religious (4pp), involved in a religious community (7pp), or actively involved in a religious community (9pp) were more likely to be chosen than a graduate who was not religious (4pp). Homeschool respondents placed slightly elevated value on religious involvement at 8 pp and 9 pp, respectively.

Table 5. Average marginal component effects

	Any Homeschool			No Homeschool		
	Est.	*SE*	*p*-value	Est.	*SE*	*p*-value
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Standardized test scores ("below average" omitted)						
Above average	0.21	*0.03*	0.000***	0.21	*0.01*	0.000***
Average	0.16	*0.03*	0.000***	0.16	*0.01*	0.000***
College matriculation ("not pursuing" omitted)						
Accepted to a university	0.10	*0.03*	0.002**	0.14	*0.01*	0.000***
Accepted to a prestigious university	0.06	*0.03*	0.046*	0.16	*0.01*	0.000***
Civic outcomes ("not involved" omitted)						
Involved in community	0.10	*0.03*	0.001***	0.13	*0.01*	0.000***
Actively involved in community	0.16	*0.03*	0.000***	0.14	*0.01*	0.000***
Academic skills ("average literacy and numeracy" omitted)						
Strong literacy skills	0.07	*0.04*	0.056	0.07	*0.01*	0.000***
Strong numeracy skills	0.04	*0.03*	0.223	0.06	*0.01*	0.000***
Strong literacy and numeracy skills	0.12	*0.03*	0.001***	0.10	*0.01*	0.000***
Religiosity ("not religious" omitted)						

Nominally religious	0.03	*0.03*	0.377	0.04	*0.01*	0.000***
Involved in a religious community	0.08	*0.04*	0.056	0.06	*0.01*	0.000***
Actively involved in a religious community	0.10	*0.04*	0.012*	0.08	*0.01*	0.000***

Notes. Standard errors clustered by respondent. Asterisks indicate level of significance, *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Following recommendations for conjoint analysis, we compare results across different respondent subgroups by considering marginal means (MMs) (Leeper et al., 2020). Whereas AMCEs capture the causal effect of an attribute on the likelihood an option will be chosen, MMs summarize the average rate at which an option was chosen when a given attribute was present. Table 6 presents the marginal means across all attributes, showing that, on average, the homeschool population aligns with the larger population on metrics of successful education, with only slight variation, noted below.

Table 6. Marginal means

	Any Homeschool		No Homeschool	
	Est.	*SE*	Est.	*SE*
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Overall marginal means	0.43		0.45	
Test: Above average	0.51	*0.02*	0.54	*0.01*
Test: Average	0.46	*0.02*	0.48	*0.01*
Test: Below average	0.30	*0.02*	0.33	*0.01*
College: Not pursuing	0.37	*0.02*	0.35	*0.01*
College: Accepted to a university	0.46	*0.02*	0.49	*0.01*
College: Accepted to a prestigious university	0.44	*0.02*	0.51	*0.01*
Civic: Not involved	0.33	*0.02*	0.36	*0.01*
Civic: Involved	0.45	*0.02*	0.49	*0.01*
Civic: Actively involved	0.50	*0.02*	0.50	*0.01*
Skills: Average literacy and numeracy	0.37	*0.02*	0.39	*0.01*
Skills: Strong literacy	0.44	*0.02*	0.46	*0.01*
Skills: Strong numeracy	0.41	*0.02*	0.45	*0.01*
Skills: Strong literacy and numeracy	0.48	*0.02*	0.49	*0.01*
Religiosity: Not religious	0.37	*0.03*	0.40	*0.01*
Religiosity: Nominally religious	0.41	*0.02*	0.44	*0.01*
Religiosity: Involved	0.45	*0.03*	0.47	*0.01*
Religiosity: Actively involved	0.47	*0.03*	0.49	*0.01*

Notes. Standard errors clustered by respondent.

Here we can see the choices of homeschooling parents compared to their peers in other schooling sectors. First, because respondents could choose either of the 2 candidates or select neither candidate within a set, it is important to consider how overall MMs varied across subgroups. On average, respondents chose a candidate in 89 percent (twice the overall MMs) of all sets, with variation across respondent characteristics, while only 84 percent of homeschoolers chose either candidate, perhaps signaling that their understanding of student success was not well captured by the survey design. Generally speaking, there is limited evidence of variation in preferred student outcomes across respondent subgroups, signaling that parents largely desire similar outcomes for their children. However, homeschoolers placed less emphasis on entrance into a prestigious college (44 percent) than did parents in other sectors and penalized graduates who were not religious (37 percent).

Discussion

These nationally representative data provide important information on today's population of parents who homeschool a child. Despite common stereotypes about homeschooling family size, respondents who homeschool have family sizes similar to those of their non-homeschooling peers. While Black and Hispanic homeschoolers are underrepresented, and White homeschoolers are overrepresented, the homeschooling population looks essentially like the larger population, and recent evidence points to increasing diversity in these populations (Smith & Watson, 2024; Bjorklund-Young & Watson, 2024).

While there is evidence of concentrated homeschool participation in small towns and rural areas, homeschooling is distributed across all locales and regions of the country. This finding could be due to differences in local culture or values, or simply related to the constriction of accessible alternative educational choices. There may be few viable choices besides the local public school or homeschooling in small towns or rural areas. Similarly, this study finds, as have others, that those who homeschool are more likely to have lower household incomes. Again, this could result from financial barriers to other choices or the need for some homeschooled families to rely on a single income if one parent is dedicated to educating children and foregoing employment.

We also find that while homeschool respondents are more likely to identify as republican and conservative, the difference is slight, and the population varies across political ideologies. Similarly, while homeschooling respondents are more religious than their non-homeschooling peers, over 30 percent never attend religious services and look very much like their non-homeschooling peers. Indeed, this finding comports with Isenberg's findings nearly two decades ago that found limited differences in religiosity between homeschooling and non-homeschooling families (2007).

Homeschooling parents are less likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher when compared to their non-homeschooling peers. Relatedly, while they appear to value college, though to a lesser degree, it is unsurprising that they discount the value of prestigious colleges. While prior findings of lower four- year degree attainment in the homeschooled population have attributed that outcome to these students potentially being less-prepared for higher education, this finding

supports the idea that homeschooled students may not obtain a four- year degree not because they cannot, but because they do not want it in the first place.

Finally, while the move to homeschooling is often characterized as rejecting public schooling, 21 percent of students and 35 percent of households who homeschool have a child also in a public school. There is also considerable evidence that all respondents engaged in choice and multiple sectors within families.

Limitations

This stated preferences experiment provides information about respondent preferences rather than actual choices. Therefore, there may be differences in what parents say they value and what they actually value. Also, we have a small sample of homeschooling respondents. However, as stated earlier, other sectors have equally small samples, and other surveys have generalized findings using samples of similar size. Nevertheless, caution is recommended when interpreting and generalizing findings to larger populations.

Variation in homeschooling respondents choosing from a set may indicate that we failed to capture important markers of a successful education for portions of this population. For future research, it may be worthwhile to investigate how other outcomes, including non-traditional career pathways and unconventional character measures, may be incorporated into future surveys to reflect the values and preferences of other parent subgroups.

Conclusion

Homeschool participation has grown dramatically in recent years and appears to be on a new upward trend (Watson, 2024b). This growth will likely lead to the continued population diversification and new innovations in how “homeschooling” is defined and delivered. The stereotypes of the past must be examined alongside accurate information and data. This study is a step toward that reexamination and a better understanding of today’s homeschooling population, why they choose to homeschool, and what they value as successful education outcomes for their children.

We find that, in general, homeschooling parents look like their non-homeschooling peers and value the same things as other parents. While there are exceptions, like highly valuing civic and religious engagement, the homeschooling population is not a monolith, and variation between these two groups is limited.

Further, the move to homeschooling does not appear to be motivated, on average, by a rejection of public schooling. Paired with continued innovation in what is defined as homeschooling and the removal of financial barriers through increased access to public funding options, such as education savings accounts and other such programs in many states, homeschooling is likely to increasingly become diverse and diffuse over time. Similarly, as this evidence indicates, many parents are already switching sectors within families. As more choices become available, parents are likely to increasingly choose from year to year and child to child the sector that best meets the needs of their families.

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