



Elites go to war on homeschooling — just when everyone’s doing it

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We’re all homeschoolers now. Schools have closed for more than 55 million students nationwide, and at least 34 states have shuttered schools for the rest of the academic year. Just in time, our media and academic elites are coming out swinging against homeschooling.

The Washington Post and Salon have raised questions about the practice lately. More alarming, Harvard Magazine this week unleashed a thoroughly unfounded attack on homeschooling, drawing on the work of Harvard University law professor Elizabeth Bartholet.

The article cited Bartholet’s call for “a presumptive ban,” because homeschooling supposedly “violates children’s right to a ‘meaningful education’ and their right to be protected from potential child abuse.”

Strangely enough, the article left out the fact that nearly two-thirds of US students aren’t proficient in reading, and that the most rigorous evidence shows that homeschool students tend to fare better academically and socially than do their peers in conventional schools.

The article also forgot to mention the 2004 report from the US Department of Education estimating that 1 in 10 students in government schools will experience school-employee sexual misconduct by the time they graduate from high school.

By Bartholet’s own logic, she should call for a presumptive ban on government schooling.

More fundamentally, Bartholet argues that the burden of proof should be on parents to get permission from the government to homeschool their own children. But this view is backward. Our children don’t belong to the government. As the US Supreme Court ruled in 1925, “the child is not the mere creature of the state.”

Bartholet also charges that parents have “essentially authoritarian control over their children” and that “it’s always dangerous to put powerful people in charge of the powerless, and to give the powerful ones total authority.” This is beyond parody. Does she not realize that using government force to ban homeschooling is the definition of authoritarianism?

The article’s anti-conservative and anti-religious bias was palpable. It argued that many homeschooling families “are driven by conservative Christian beliefs” and that “some of these parents are ‘extreme religious ideologues.’ ”

This is fearmongering. I’m not a religious believer, but all Americans have a First Amendment right to freely exercise their religious beliefs, even if some academic elites don’t like it. At some point, moreover, secularism of the kind that animates Bartholet and the Harvard piece bleeds into a kind of dogma of its own.

Perhaps even more disturbing was the bizarre image that accompanied the article: that of a sad homeschooled child imprisoned in her home while other kids are free to play outside. That image, again, had it completely backward. Homeschoolers actually have more time to play outside, since they aren't stuck in classrooms all day.

A 2019 study in the Peabody Journal of Education found that homeschool students are also more likely to participate in cultural and family activities than are similar students in government-run schools.

Incidentally, the house in the Harvard image was built out of four books. And just in case you didn't pick up the anti-religious animus from the text, one of the books was the Bible.

More amusing still, another book was originally misspelled as “arithmatic,” though Harvard Magazine corrected the spelling error a few days later. Talk about an extraordinary self-own.

The article, it seems, is part of a broader Harvard campaign against homeschooling. Harvard Law School will be hosting an anti-homeschooling conference this June. According to its program, the conference's “focus will be on problems of educational deprivation and child maltreatment” — suggesting that the framing and conclusions are predetermined.

I would love to attend for the sake of healthy viewpoint diversity. Alas, attendance is by invitation only.

There is plenty of room for debating the merits of homeschooling. But an all-out attack on the right of families to homeschool their own children, at a time when nearly all families are homeschooling by necessity, displays the level of un-self-awareness only elite liberal academe is truly capable of.

We need a genuine exchange of ideas based on the evidence rather than sensationalism and dark assumptions about religious families. And we should always discuss the merits of homeschooling relative to a realistic alternative — government schooling — rather than perfection.

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