

## Enemies Of Homeschooling Are Scared. Here's Why

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June 9, 2020

Nearly every family with kids has gotten a taste of homeschooling over the past two months. In an attempt to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, at least 124,000 schools have closed for over 55 million children in the U.S. At the same time, opponents of homeschooling launched several unfounded attacks on the practice. For example, The Washington Post ran an opinion piece claiming “homeschooling during the coronavirus will set back a generation of children,” and a Salon article said that “homeschooling as a result of the pandemic will likely worsen education for students and pose serious problems to the economy and nation’s social well-being.”

The most relentless attacks on homeschooling, however, have come from publications affiliated with Harvard University. Harvard Magazine initially released an article on “The Risks of Homeschooling,” highlighting the work of Harvard Law School Professor Elizabeth Bartholet, who calls for a presumptive ban on the practice because she believes it “violates children’s right to a ‘meaningful education’ and their right to be protected from potential child abuse.”

Harvard Law School also planned to host a now-cancelled anti-homeschooling conference this summer, co-organized by Bartholet, on the “problems of educational deprivation and child maltreatment that too often occur under the guise of homeschooling.”

Since then, The Harvard Crimson published the column “In Defense of Elizabeth Bartholet” by a Harvard University employee and The Harvard Gazette released an interview with Bartholet titled “A Warning on Homeschooling.”

Although the attacks on homeschooling lack situational awareness – coming just as parents and students try to make the best of the situation they’re in during the pandemic – the persistent backlash might be more understandable if one’s goal is to reduce the number of homeschoolers in the long-run. About a month ago, I pointed out that when it comes to the numbers, the enemies of homeschooling might be freaking out because they have nothing to gain and everything to lose from the lockdown.

Even in the unlikely event that every single family decides that they do not like their test-drive of homeschooling, the post-pandemic proportion of homeschoolers would simply return to the pre-coronavirus level of about 3% of the school-aged population. This is because the people who figure out that they do not like homeschooling – or at least the watered-down version of it during a crisis – weren’t homeschooling anyway.

But, imagine if only 2% of the families with children who attended government schools before the lockdown decide to continue homeschooling post-pandemic. Because around 50 million children attended public schools before the lockdown, that 2% change would lead to around one million more homeschoolers next year. Because around 1.7 million students were homeschooled before the lockdown, that would be around a 59% jump in the U.S. homeschool population.

According to a story by Insider, Bartholet admitted “she’s concerned that families who weren’t homeschooling prior to the pandemic will decide to go that route, even after schools reopen.”

Bartholet is right about one thing – the data show that enemies of homeschooling freedom indeed have a lot to worry about.

The first evidence on the subject, a nationally representative survey conducted by EdChoice and Morning Consult, found that 52% of families reported having a more favorable view of homeschooling as a result of COVID-19, whereas only 26% of families reported having a less favorable view of homeschooling.

More recently, a national online survey conducted by RealClear Opinion Research found that 40% of parents say they are more likely to homeschool or virtual school after the lockdown, whereas only 31% reported the opposite.

Just this week, a survey conducted by USA Today and Ipsos found that 60% of parents are likely to continue homeschooling this fall even if schools reopen. Additionally, the poll found that 30% of parents reported being “very likely” to continue homeschooling this fall.

While some of these families would be considering homeschooling because they’re scared to send their children to school during a pandemic, the openness to homeschooling is especially compelling because home education during a pandemic is arguably the worst-case scenario for what homeschooling could actually look like. The shift to homeschooling was involuntary and abrupt this spring, and the lockdown means that children aren’t able to access social learning activities such as theaters, museums, or team sports. Just imagine how favorable the responses would have been if the families were able to test-drive real homeschooling.

To attempt to more closely address the specific question of how many families will actually switch over to homeschooling, I conducted a non-representative informal survey of 1,330 parents using my social media accounts and the Reason Foundation website. In the survey, I asked parents where they sent their youngest school-aged child before the COVID-19 lockdown and where they plan to send that same child after the lockdown. My informal, unscientific survey found that around 15% of families who had children attending government schools before the lockdown report that they currently plan to continue homeschooling even after the lockdown.

Anything approaching that number would represent a huge change in the education system. Around 50 million children were in government schools before the lockdown, so a 15% transfer to homeschooling would increase the U.S. homeschooling population by about 7.5 million students, which would approximately quintuple the current number of homeschoolers.

However, the results of this survey should be considered with caution since the respondents are likely more predisposed to switch to homeschooling than the general population of families.

Although each of these data points is imperfect, they all point in the same direction and tell a similar story: homeschooling could rise substantially next year. These results make sense. Anecdotally, families are reporting that their children are less anxious, more “relaxed,” “reading better,” and “so much happier.” Some parents have even reported that they officially unenrolled their children from the government school because they are committed to continue homeschooling after the lockdown.

There's another reason to expect that families will want to continue homeschooling even after conventional schools reopen. Images and videos from other countries can give Americans a glimpse of what schooling might look next fall when schools would be reopening before a vaccine is available — and some families might be reluctant to send their children back to those environments.

For example, an image from a school reopening in France showed young children each trapped in one-person play spaces outside during recess. A viral video from an elementary school in Canada showed a teacher explaining how a typical day would look when students returned. The teacher said that there would be one-way hallways, desks six feet apart, and that the gym, library, playground, and cafeteria would all be closed. Many commentators on social media asked if the video was a parody, and some people pointed out that the video was a fantastic advertisement for homeschooling.

One of the main purported benefits of conventional schooling is that children might experience positive forms of socialization. However, the just-released Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for reopening schools could largely reduce some of the opportunities for kids to socialize. Regardless of how one feels about the costs and benefits of the CDC guidelines themselves, they are likely to keep some families from sending their children back to conventional schools next year. In fact, RedState's Kira Davis said that "I will not send my child back to our very excellent local public school if it looks anything like this."

But these data aren't the only thing that should worry enemies of homeschooling. Their arguments for a presumptive ban on the practice don't hold water. Harvard's Elizabeth Bartholet calls for a presumptive ban on homeschooling because she believes it "violates children's right to a 'meaningful education' and their right to be protected from potential child abuse."

Those claims are not supported by the evidence. A peer-reviewed systematic review of the evidence shows that homeschoolers generally fare better academically and socially than their peers in government schools. A 2018 review of the evidence found that "homeschooled children are abused at a lower rate than are those in the general public, and no evidence shows that the home educated are at any higher risk of abuse

However, we do have evidence of real educational failures and abuse in government schools. For example, a review of the literature conducted by the Department of Education estimated that one in 10 children in government schools would experience some type of educator sexual misconduct by the time they graduate from high school. And the Nation's Report Card just reported that only 15% of eighth grade students are proficient in U.S. history, and three out of four students are not proficient in civics or geography. By Bartholet's own logic, these results suggest she should be calling for a presumptive ban on government schooling, not homeschooling.

Bartholet generalizes extreme outliers to justify a presumptive ban on the practice for everyone — but only when it comes to homeschooling. A ban punishes all families for the actions of a few bad actors. Bartholet understands that her own logic is faulty — or at least it appears she did back in 2014.

In an interview with Russia Today in 2014, Elizabeth Bartholet refuted her own current-day argument to ban homeschooling for everyone based on rare instances of negative events such as abuse. When the interviewer cited rare cases of abuse to argue against the current form of

international adoption, Bartholet pointed out that “people who do not like international adoption love the fact that occasionally scandals show up because those scandals can be used as a way to shut down international adoption.”

Bartholet’s argument was clear in 2014: We shouldn’t generalize extreme outliers to the population. She was right. But the professor should apply that same logic to the homeschooling debate in 2020 and rethink her proposal to ban the practice.

Things aren’t looking good for the enemies of homeschooling. Their arguments to take away our right to educate our own children at home lack evidence and logic. Families are also figuring out that homeschooling can work better than conventional schooling, and the latest data indicate that there may be a massive spike in the proportion of homeschoolers next year. The difficult circumstances of the pandemic may ultimately lead to parents finding out what education systems work best for their kids and to an expansion of educational freedom.

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