

Homeschooling emerges as a viable alternative to ideologically driven public education.

[The Post Millennial](#) - Friday June 12th, 2020

Harvard University was supposed to be hosting a by-invitation-only conference next week, billed as a “Homeschooling Summit.” The official description stated that “the focus will be on problems of educational deprivation and child maltreatment that too often occur under the guise of homeschooling.” Or, in laymen’s terms, “Homeschooling is evil, and we have to do something about it.”

Ironically, the conference had to be cancelled because of the coronavirus crisis, during which 55 million U.S.K-12 students have for three months been...homeschooled! In a further irony, it might be that after this obligatory “test drive,” a significant number of parents could decide they quite like it, and want to continue.

If they do, stakeholders in the public education system won’t be happy for both financial and ideological reasons, to be discussed further along.

But from a “consumer” point of view, especially those who have long been passively dissatisfied with their children’s public-system education, the lockdown-inspired nudge to further inquiry will reveal attractive homeschooling models for the 21st century designed to suit a spectrum of individual needs. Those already being homeschooled have obviously not skipped a beat in this crisis. But before the lockdown, they were invisible. Now a lot of eyes are on them.

As nobody alive today can remember a time when bricks-and-mortar schools were not the norm, we tend to see learning at home as unnatural, artificial. But a form of homeschooling was the norm for all of recorded history until less than 200 years ago (education is not even mentioned in the US constitution).

What seems artificial to advocates of homeschooling is the delivery of education to children grouped according to age and receiving instruction geared to the average learner. As they like to point out when their choice comes under attack, public school education is a paradigm borrowed from the assembly-line model of efficiency created by the Industrial Revolution. (If you read Charles Dickens’s novel, *Hard Times*, you will get the drift of their resistance in an entertaining but sobering plot.)

Mass production, it must be remembered, was at first considered the ultimate symbol of progress. So public education was embraced without demur until the 1960s, when the counter-culture challenged the received wisdom of all social institutions. The modern homeschool movement began in the US, but Canada quickly picked up on its essentials.

In the US, there are about two million students—3.4 percent of the population—being homeschooled. Hard statistics ~~here~~ not easily come by, but it is estimated that between 50-95,000 children in Canada are homeschooled, or half a percent of the student population. According to the Fraser Institute, nine of ten provinces saw increases in numbers between 2007/8 and 2014/15. (Manitoba has the highest number of homeschooled students and the highest increase—140 percent—during those years.) Regulations and funding vary by province.

Mention homeschooling, and the average person will immediately associate it with religious fundamentalism or cultish anti-government paranoia. There was more than a germ of truth in that stereotype in its early days. But in the last 40 years of its modern revival, homeschooling has become a completely mainstream alternative to institutionalized learning, both public and private.

Homeschooling got a boost after the 1999 school shootings in Columbine, Colo., when homeschooling support groups’ phones rang off the hooks with inquiries. Aside from fear of violence, motivators are too-early sexual peer pressure (often school-abetted), and bullying of all kinds, especially on social media, which sometimes leads to suicide.

Broadly speaking, there are two homeschooling camps: pedagogues and ideologues. Pedagogues—many homeschooling parents are disaffected teachers—dislike the professionalism and bureaucratic nature of modern education. They see peer-group learning as artificial. But they are up on educational theories and child development, so tailor traditional instruction to meet individual learning styles. For military families and children with learning disabilities, homeschooling is a natural fit. These “unschoolers” take their inspiration from alternative schools teacher John Holt, who chronicled a litany of complaints against the public school system in a series of books in the 1970s, notably, *How Children Fail*.

Ideologues promote religion-based values. They communicate to their children that the family is society’s most important institution. They often cluster with other like-minded families for group learning, producing a kind of school-at-home environment with the same time constraints and rigid curriculum structures as bricks-and-mortar schools.

Most are Protestant Christian, but there are also support groups for homeschooling Catholics, Jews, Muslims, people of colour, and the disabled. Ideological homeschoolers take their inspiration from Raymond Moore, the “Dr Spock of homeschooling,” a former US Department of Education employee who laid the groundwork in his books, *Home Grown Kids* and *Home Spun Schools*.

Homeschooling is nowadays easily accessible, adaptable, responsive to disparate needs, not at all monolithic in nature, and for parents willing to make the commitment, a welcome liberation from the increasing politicization of the public system.

You don’t have to be a religious fundamentalist to be alarmed by the “identity” gender and racial messaging that has trickled down into early childhood education from the culture wars raging in the adult world. Or to feel that the public-school system has become more than a little power-drunk, regarding parents as mere accessories to their guardianship of children, tolerated if they toe the line on current progressive dogmas, and targeted as enemies of the state if they don’t. The U.S. spends about \$15,000 a year per student. If even an extra one percent of families leaves the public system for homeschooling, that will reduce school funding by \$7.5 billion a year. What if families start demanding that education funds follow the child, whether the child is schooled in the public system, an independent school, a charter school, or home? The financial fallout would be a significant blow, to be sure, but where the canker gnaws deepest is at the ideological level.

In April, Harvard Magazine published a fierce attack on homeschooling, highlighting the work of Harvard Law School Professor and director of the Law School’s Child Advocacy Program Elizabeth Bartholet, who is the driving force behind the cancelled conference cited in my opening. She calls for a “presumptive ban” on the practice, citing children’s right “to meaningful education” and their “right to be protected from potential child abuse.”

In an equally hard-hitting rebuttal piece, Corey DeAngelis, Director of School Choice at the Reason Foundation, counters Bartholet’s claims and accusations. Bartholet says she worries that homeschooled children may not be taught democratic principles “such as tolerance of other people’s views and values,” a barn-door wide opening for DeAngelis’s wry observation that tolerance is sadly lacking in Bartholet’s attitude to Christians and conservatives.

Bartholet’s concerns about “maltreatment” of homeschooled children are not persuasive, since she offers no evidence – and surely – my observation, not DeAngelis’s - parents bent on maltreatment would use the 18 other hours a day at their disposal. (There have been reports of increased abuse during the lockdown, but those parents didn’t want their kids at home in the first place, and will be the first to send them back to schools when they can.)

(As for teaching tolerance, as I write, the US – and to a lesser extent all western countries, including Canada – finds itself roiled by unprecedented tension over “systemic racism” in police forces across America. If that is indeed the case, then the public-school system must admit to massive failure in the domain of tolerance teaching, since virtually every police officer in the nation is one of its graduates. Has a single homeschooled police officer ever injured or killed an innocent person of colour? Has a single homeschooled killed anybody arising from intolerance learned at home? Here is a gigantic tarnished pot calling a teeny little kettle black.)

If it is abuse of children Bartholet wants to open discussion to, that’s fine with DeAngelis, permitting him to adduce evidence-based reportage of epic deficits in the public school system. Only 15 percent of students are proficient in U.S. history; only 25 percent are proficient in civics and geography. According to DeAngelis, the U.S. Department of Education estimates one in ten children in government schools “will experience educator sexual misconduct by the time they graduate from high school.” A shocking report from the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reveals that 79 percent of government schools recorded a violent incident or crime on their campuses, and found 20 percent of students were bullied in the most recent school year.

Bartholet says that “[t]he biggest teachers’ unions in the country have found homeschooling deeply problematic.” As that were an argument against homeschooling. The teachers’ unions are also against private schools and charter schools, even though both have produced demonstrably superior outcomes for those students lucky enough to attend them. As DeAngelis rightly observes, “The teachers union isn’t in the business of helping students; it’s in the business of protecting a monopoly.” It’s the same in Canada.

The last three months have proved to be an unwanted, but fascinating experience in remote learning—or lack of it—for children, but also for their parents, who have had the opportunity to assess the advantages and deficits of platforms like Zoom in keeping their own work as well as their children’s education on track. Nobody thinks remote learning is or should be a full-time substitute for the classroom or office, but its demonstrated utility has convinced many businesses that a hybrid model of in-house and remote working is the way of the future.

As I observed in a recent column elsewhere, children lucky enough to attend private schools in Canada were well served by remote learning programs that closely approximated their regular routines. They continued to do homework, submit projects and “attend” classes at least five hours a day. It was quite another story for the public schools, whose unions, fixated on teachers’ well-being, pretty well told students that they could goof off for the entire semester.

BLM protesters and their allies are calling for an overhaul of policing. There’s certainly lots of room for improvement there, and all right-thinking people should welcome fresh thinking and new brooms on that front. But while we’re at that, we should consider the moment ripe for an interrogation of other institutions we have taken for granted as immutable, but whose performance has been patchy at best and often lamentable. The public education system, for one. Unlike policing, where only the super-wealthy can afford their own personal bodyguards, homeschooling is available to the masses.