

The Reinvention of Homeschooling

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For Education Next

“I never really told anybody about my music at school, only my really close friends,” Cheyenne Kimball told *People Magazine* in 2006. “Then [school officials] actually aired the show around the whole entire school, and that caused a lot of problems. I was a straight-A student and all of a sudden I didn’t want to go to school anymore because of the things people were saying. That’s why I’m homeschooled now.” Cheyenne, winner of NBC’s *America’s Most Talented Kid* at age 12, recording artist, and star of her own MTV show, is just one of many high-profile Americans whose educational choices make it clear that homeschooling has gone mainstream. Bethany Hamilton, a homeschooled surfer girl, became an instant celebrity when she survived a shark attack in 2003 that cost her an arm. Her tragedy and inspiring recovery have been leveraged into a “mini-empire” of merchandise, including her own perfume, accessory line, fiction, advice books, and autobiography. Movie stars Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, married in 1997, homeschool their two children along with Will’s nephew. Why? “For flexibility,” Jada told an *Essence* reporter, “so they can stay with us when we travel, and also because the school system in this country—public and private—is designed for the industrial age. We’re in a technological age. We don’t want our kids to memorize. We want them to learn.”¹

Though parents and tutors have been teaching children in the home for centuries, in the late 1960s and 1970s there emerged for the first time in the United States a political movement

¹ Chris Strauss, “Cheyenne Kimball Sounds Off,” *People*, 24 July 2006, 41. Kate Stinchfield, “Bethany Hamilton: Update,” *Time*, 7 August 2006, 23. Danyel Smith, “Crazy in Love,” *Essence*, February 2005, 136.

that adopted this practice as a radical, counter-cultural critique of the public education system. Conservatives who felt the public schools had sold out to secularism and progressivism joined with progressives who felt the public schools were bastions of conservative conformity to challenge the notion that all children should go to school. By the early 1990s they had won the right to homeschool in every state of the country. Some homeschool advocacy groups have attempted to secure a federal law or Supreme Court ruling that would establish uniform national guidelines grounded in First or Fourteenth Amendment rights, but to date such efforts have failed (to the great relief of other homeschool advocacy groups who oppose this strategy).

Homeschooling thus falls under state law, and these laws vary widely. They are the result of a complex matrix of specific statutory language and judicial interpretations that has emerged out of the maelstrom of political activism over the issue from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. In states like Indiana and Michigan, for example, there are virtually no restrictions on homeschoolers and very little accountability to government--homeschooling parents are not even required to register. In states like Pennsylvania and New York, on the other hand, state agencies oversee and regulate homeschooling in a number of ways, from curricular requirements to parental qualifications to mandatory home visits by certified personnel to obligatory standardized testing. By the 21st century these laws were well established and uncontested, though nearly every year state legislators or judges, especially in the most permissive states, seek to increase regulations on homeschooling families in the name of accountability. Such initiatives, however, nearly always fail due to the astonishing grassroots organization and political mobilization of homeschoolers.²

Once the legal right had been secured, homeschooling entered a growth phase that has continued to the present day. Reliable nation-wide numbers continue to be difficult to obtain, but

² Milton Gaither, *Homeschool: An American History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 175-200.

the National Center for Educational Statistics estimates that from 1999 to 2003 there was a increase from around 850,000 homeschoolers to roughly 1.1 million nationwide, a 29 percent jump in four years. Movement leaders continue to suggest even higher estimates of around 2 to 2.5 million homeschooled children. A less speculative sense of the movement's growth can be seen from figures kept by some states. Virginia, for example, had 3,816 registered homeschoolers in 1990. By 2007 the number had grown to 27,316. Maryland saw a similar growth from 2,296 in 1990 to 24,227 in 2006. In these and other states annual growth rates have begun to slow somewhat after over a decade of dynamic expansion. There are even hints in some states that homeschooling rates may have peaked and are even declining a bit. In Pennsylvania, for example, there were 24,415 reported homeschoolers in 2003, the largest figure the state had ever seen. But in 2004 the number of registered homeschoolers dropped for the first time ever, to 24,076. In 2005 it dropped again to 23,287, a decrease of 3.3 percent from the previous year. The most likely explanation for the declines here and in some other states showing similar drops is the increased use of home-based public charter schools, often called "cybercharters" because of their extensive use of on-line curricula, by families that had previously been homeschooling independently.³

³ Daniel Princiotta and Stacey Bielick, "Homeschooling in the United States: 2003" (Washington, D.C.: National Center For Educational Statistics, 2006). Brian D. Ray, "Research Facts on Homeschooling: General Facts and Trends," *National Home Education Research Institute*, 10 July 2006, <<http://www.nheri.org/content/view/199/>> (10 August 2007). Daniel de Vise, "Schooling Has Grown Well Beyond Home: As Ranks of Parent Educators Increase, So Do Socializing, Use of Community," *The Washington Post*, 7 March 2005, sec. B. John Creason, "Home Education in Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Department of Education*, February 2006, <<http://www.pde.state.pa.us/k12statistics/lib/k12statistics/homeEd0405withFig2.pdf>> (10 August 2007).

Along with the growing acceptance of homeschooling has come an increasing diversification of who homeschools and of what homeschooling actually means. No longer is homeschooling exclusive to Christian fundamentalism or the countercultural left. Furthermore, homeschoolers are creating hybrid forms of education that challenge the stark dichotomy between home and school characteristic of the rhetoric and political conflicts of the 1980s and 90s. Homeschooling, in fact, is blending with other educational movements to lead the way toward a 21st century educational matrix that is far more dynamic and adaptive than the schooling of the past.

1. The New Homeschoolers

Recent survey research has revealed a considerably more heterogeneous population of homeschoolers than earlier and more limited studies had found. Polling data has found far higher rates of minority homeschooling (20 percent in one study) than previously believed. Several recent studies of parental motivation have found academic concerns to outweigh religious reasons in the choice to homeschool. Guillermo Montes' analysis of the massive National Household Survey data found that 70 percent of respondents cited a non-religious reason as the top motivator in their decision to homeschool. Homeschoolers whose motivations are primarily religious have certainly not gone away (41.31 percent in Montes' study), but they are now joined by many who do so for all sorts of reasons, ranging from concerns about special education to bad experiences with teachers or school bullies to a proliferation of time-consuming outside activities to worries over peanut allergies. Many such parents, unfamiliar with the niche culture of conservative Protestantism, have often felt unwelcome in homeschool support groups created in the 1980s and 1990s by Christians, leading to an explosion in recent years of groups without any

doctrinal platform. The homeschooling movement began with a few thousand very progressive leftists and tens of thousands of very conservative Protestants adopting the homeschooling paradigm in the 1970s-1990s. By the late 1980s the Protestants, much more numerous and better organized than the progressives, had secured control of the homeschooling movement. But since the late 1990s conservatives have watched their control dissipate as more mainstream elements who do not share the anti-government ideology of the more hardcore veterans have flocked to the practice, as have many other groups who, while not mainstream, are certainly not conservative Protestant.⁴

The increasing participation of African Americans in homeschooling has drawn quite a bit of media attention in recent years, partly because the movement was associated so strongly with conservative WASPs in the 1980s and 1990s, and partly because the vexing achievement gap between black and white students that has inspired so many educational reform initiatives continues unabated. If we think of homeschooling as an alternative to government schooling, then it clearly has a long history among African Americans going back to the days of slavery when literacy could often be imparted in no other way. Even so, the segregation and lack of school access blacks have endured led many post-emancipation African Americans to look to the school as a “pillar of fire by night after a clouded day,” in the words of W.E.B. DuBois. But even

⁴ Theodore C. Wagenaar, “What Characterizes Home Schoolers? A National Study” in *Education* 117, no. 3 (Spring 1997):440-444. Daniel Princiotta, Stacey Bielick, and Chris Chapman, “1.1 Million Homeschooled Students in the United States in 2003” (Washington, D.C.: National Center For Educational Statistics, 2004). Patrick Basham, “Home Schooling: From the Extreme to the Mainstream,” in *Public Policy Sources* 51 (2001): 3-18. Guillermo Montes, “Do Parental Reasons to Homeschool Vary by Grade? Evidence from the National Household Education Survey,” in *Home School Researcher* 16, no. 4 (2006): 11-17. Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 107-142.

as many African Americans looked to the schools to bring them freedom and prosperity, others were concluding that public education was part of what was holding them down. Throughout the twentieth century isolated black families kept their children out of public schools and taught them at home. By the 1990s there were enough African Americans doing so that some statewide homeschooling organizations began holding a session or two on minority homeschooling at their annual conventions.⁵

Homeschooling among African Americans has grown rapidly since the late 1990s. The U.S. Department of Education estimated that by 2003 there were 103,000 Black homeschoolers. Nonprofits like the Children's Scholarship Fund, founded in 1998, have provided vouchers to help low income families attend private schools, and some are using the money to homeschool. Several nation-wide support groups have been formed by African Americans to build momentum, the newest and largest of which is the National African-American Homeschoolers Alliance, founded in 2003 by Jennifer James. By 2006 the organization had 3,000 members. James learned of homeschooling by watching the success of homeschoolers at the Scripps National Spelling Bee and embraced it for her family. "Families are running out of options," James notes, "There's this persistent achievement gap, and a lot of black children are doing so poorly in traditional schools that parents are looking for alternatives." Homeschooling is

⁵ Richard Rothstein, *Class and Schools: Using Social, Economic, and Educational Reform to Close the Black-White Achievement Gap* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2004). W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 5. Grace Llewellyn, *Freedom Challenge: African American Homeschoolers* (Eugene, OR: Lowry House Publishers, 1996), 267-288. Leslie Fulbright, "Blacks Take Education Into Their Own Hands. New Ground: Once Dominated by Whites, Homeschooling Appeals to More African Americans," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 September 2006, sec. A. Susan A. McDowell *et al.*, "Participation and Perception: Looking at Home Schooling Through a Multicultural Lens," in *Peabody Journal of Education* 75, nos. 1 & 2 (2000): 124-146.

becoming the option of choice for many, and as such “the Black homeschool movement is growing at a faster rate than the general homeschool population.”⁶

While the recent growth of homeschooling among African Americans has attracted the most press, the trend can be spotted among many other groups as well. Native American homeschool organizations have been founded to escape assimilationist public schools and preserve native values in Virginia and North Carolina. Similarly, many Hawaiian natives have found homeschooling to be the solution to the gulf between tribal ways and public education. Jews, especially the Orthodox, have been homeschooling in much greater numbers in recent years. While Roman Catholic families have long had a presence in the homeschooling world with such institutions as the Virginia-based Seton Home Study School (founded in 1980), recent years have seen an explosion in Catholic homeschooling and resources. Islamic homeschooling has also grown rapidly, especially since 9/11, largely because “the public school system is not accommodating to Muslims,” in the words of Fatima Saleem, founder of the Palmetto Muslim

⁶ Basham, “Home Schooling: From the Extreme to the Mainstream,” 7-8. Princiotta, *et al.* “Homeschooling in the United States,” 5. Isabel Lyman, *The Homeschooling Revolution* (Amherst, MA: Bench Press, 2000), 44. Greg Beato, “The House the Burgeses Built” in *Reason* 36, no. 11 (April 2005): 38-39. Fulbright, “Blacks Take Education Into Their Own Hands.” Rebecca Catalanello, “Homeschooling: It’s Not What You Think,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 26 June 2005, sec. A. “Bad News for White Supremacists: Home-Schooled Blacks Do Just as Well as Homeschooled Whites on Standardized Tests,” *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 31 July 2000, 53-54. Jennifer James, “Why Black Children Benefit from Homeschooling,” *Suite 101*, 30 October 2004, <http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/african_american_homeschooling/111986> (17 August 2007). Nafisa M. Rachid, “Homeschooling: It’s a Growing Trend Among Blacks,” in *Network Journal* 12, no. 4 (February 2005): 10. “Black Support Groups,” *National African-American Homeschoolers Alliance*, <<http://www.naaha.com/support.htm>> (17 August 2007). “More Black Families Home Schooling,” *Jacksonville Free Press*, 15-21 December 2005, 12.

Homeschool Resource Network. Homeschooling has become quite popular among neo-Pagans, Wiccans, and other adherents of alternative religions because it allows them to escape from schools they see as “embodying secular science’s rationalized world view” and to impart concepts of “individual potential, spirituality, and holism” to their children. Many Aryan Nations members and other white nationalist “Folk” are strong advocates of homeschooling and have a robust presence on the internet.⁷

Large numbers of parents whose children have diagnosed learning disabilities have pulled them from schools, believing they can do a better job teaching them at home. Increasing numbers of wealthy Americans are hiring private tutors. The U.S. Department of Education estimated that in 2003 twenty-one percent of homeschoolers were being taught this way. The largest tutor-supply company, Professional Tutors of America, has 6,000 tutors on its payroll but

⁷ Gina Rozon, “Interview with Misty Dawn Thomas,” *Home Education Magazine*, 17, no. 3 (May-June 2000): 20-21. Sharyn Robbins-Kennedy, “Native Americans for Home Education,” <<http://www.geocities.com/nuwahti/NAHE.html>> (17 August 2007). Elaine Kelsey Harvey, “High Hopes: A Qualitative Study of Family Values Guiding ‘Home Schooling’ Education in the Multi-Ethnic Environment of Hawaii” (Ed.D. diss., University of Hawaii, 1999). Rochelle Eisenberg, “Class Half Full,” *Baltimore Jewish Times*, 2 February 2007, 36-42. Ted Siefer, “Homeschooling Growing in Popularity Among Jewish Parents, Children,” *The Jewish Advocate*, 19-25 August 2005, sec. B. “25 Years of Experience in Helping Parents,” *Seton Home Study School*, <<http://www.setonhome.org/history.php>> (17 August 2007). Amaris Elliott-Engel, “More Muslims Teach Children in the Home-Faith Lessons Gain in Minority Group,” *The Washington Times*, 29 July 2002, sec. A. Maralee Mayberry, “Teaching for the New Age: A Study of New Age Families Who Educate Their Children at Home” in *Home School Researcher* 5, no. 3 (1989): 16. Kristin Madden, *Pagan Homeschooling: A Guide to Adding Spirituality to Your Child’s Education* (Niceville, FL: Spilled Candy Books, 2002). “Education and Homeschooling: Preparing Ourselves and Our Children,” *Stormfront White Nationalist Community*, <<http://www.stormfront.org/forum/forumdisplay.php/education-and-homeschooling-28.html>> (17 August 2007).

still cannot meet even a third of the in-home requests it receives. Michelle Conlin has explained the appeal of home education to “creative-class parents” as an outgrowth of the “spread of the post-geographic workstyle” and “flex-time economy.” Home schooling “can untether families from zip codes and school districts” even as it prepares children for “the global knowledge economy.”⁸

A final group of homeschoolers that should be mentioned in this brief catalogue of diversity is the conglomerate of children who engage in one form or another of intensive extracurricular activity. Children involved in sports requiring rigorous training, acting and modeling, demanding arts or music programs, and so forth are often homeschooled. In motocross, where an elite-level thirteen-year-old can earn over \$100,000 a year, ninety percent of minors are either homeschoolers or dropouts. Circe Wallace, a retired snowboarder-turned-action sport agent, remarked in 2006, “I’ve been in this business 15 years, and it’s always been those with parents that understand the freedom and flexibility of home-schooling that go the furthest.” Orange County gymnast Katy Nogaki was eleven years old when she told a reporter, “my coaches...said if I home-schooled, I could come to the gym early and I could get really far in gymnastics.... When I was in regular school, I wasn’t as good, but when I was home-schooled, I got state champion.” Actress and singer Vanessa Hudgens, like many other kids trying to make it in Hollywood, “didn’t really have any time to go to a real school.” Her mother homeschooled her from the 8th grade on between acting classes and auditions. The family’s

⁸Tiny Aurora, “Elective Home Education and Special Educational Needs” in *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 55-66. Susan Saulny, “The Gilded Age of Home Schooling,” *New York Times*, 5 June 2006, sec. A. Michelle Conlin, “Meet My Teachers: Mom and Dad,” *Business Week*, 20 February 2006, 80-81.

sacrifices were abundantly rewarded when *High School Musical* and its sequel became world-wide sensations, making Hudgens a household name.⁹

In short, home education is now being done by so many different kinds of people for so many different reasons that it no longer makes much sense to speak of it as a political movement or even a set of movements. Make no mistake, the veteran political movement is still going strong, as legislatures that attempt to increase regulations quickly discover. For a growing number of Americans, however, homeschooling is just one option among many to consider, for a few months or for or a lifetime. Many of this new breed of homeschooling parents, even if they do not become dues-paying members of homeschooling political organizations, still need help with difficult pedagogical or curricular decisions, playmates for their children and companionship for themselves, and opportunities just to get out of the house for a while. Homeschool support groups today can be some of the most diverse conglomerates in the country, as Pam Sorooshian's description of her southern California group suggests,

My homeschooling group includes Moslem, Jewish, Quaker, Baptist, Messianic Jews, Pagan, Baha'i, atheist, agnostic, Catholic, unity, evangelicals, other protestant denominations, and probably more. We have African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Middle Easterners, and other minorities. We have stay-at-home dads and single mothers. We are

⁹ Matt Higgins, "For New-Sport Athletes, High School Finishes 2nd," *New York Times*, 20 September 2006, sec. Sports. Seema Mehta, "New Role for Home Study: Honing a Gift," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 July 2005, sec. B. Ruben Nepales, "Vanessa Hudgens: 'I Love Being a Filipina,'" *Asian Journal Online*, 9 August 2007, <<http://www.asianjournal.com/?c=188&a=22136>> (27 August 2007).

FAR more diverse than the neighborhood school I pulled my oldest child out of 10 years ago.¹⁰

2. The New Homeschooling

Homeschooling families of the 1980s and 1990s typically fell somewhere along a continuum of pedagogical practice. On the left side of the continuum was “unschooling,” a word coined by John Holt to describe the liberation of children from adult-imposed constraints on their learning. Unschoolers have no formal curriculum, no tests, grades, schedules, or benchmarks. Instead, children are free to do as they please with the parent serving largely as a facilitator of the child’s individual growth and development. On the right side of the continuum was the formal “school in a box” approach whereby a parent purchased a full year’s worth of textbooks, worksheets, tests, and assignments and attempted to reproduce in the home the same basic pedagogical strategies practiced in most schools. Not surprisingly, progressive types leaned toward unschooling and conservative Protestants trended toward formal curriculum, usually provided by fundamentalist private schools, the most popular being A Beka Book, Bob Jones Complete, and Christian Liberty Academy Satellite Schools. While some families began on one side of this continuum and stayed there, most gradually incorporated a bit of both approaches. The most typical progression was from a complete dependence on prefabricated curriculum in the first year of homeschooling to a much more flexible, eclectic orientation by the third. Nevertheless, since the great majority of homeschoolers in the 80s and 90s were conservative Protestants, Christian presses did, and continue to do, a brisk business selling textbooks and

¹⁰ Pam Sorooshian, “2004 American Educational Research Association,” 22 February 2004, <http://www.nhen.org/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=614&whichpage=2> (17 August 2007).

other material to them, often at huge annual conventions attended by thousands, at local Christian bookstores, and, increasingly, over the internet.¹¹

Recent political and legal developments have made it much more difficult to draw sharp distinctions between homeschools and plain old schools and have begun to cut in on the profits and organizational integrity of the Protestant homeschooling movement's base. Homeschoolers have for some time been creating hybrids that blend elements of formal schooling into the usual pattern of a mother teaching her own biological children at home. One of the simplest hybrids is the "Mom School." Pioneer Utah homeschooler Joyce Kinmont explains: "a Mom School happens when a mother is homeschooling a child who wants to do something that can be done best in a group, so she invites other homeschooling families to join her. The mom is the teacher." Related but slightly different is the homeschool cooperative, a very popular form of education wherein a group of mothers (and sometimes fathers) pool their expertise, each teaching a subject she knows well to all the children in the group. Sometimes such co-ops are held in the homes of respective group members, but often they meet in area churches or other buildings. The most successful and developed of these begin to look quite a bit like schools, sometimes even hiring experts to teach advanced subjects like calculus, foreign language, or physics. Some of these co-ops even *look* like schools to the outside observer, with an adult teacher in the front lecturing to rows of students sitting quietly at desks. Others, however, carry the more free-flowing pedagogy of many homeschoolers into the new setting. North Star, a Massachusetts cooperative billing itself as "self directed learning for teens" was formed in 1996 by two disgruntled public school teachers. At North Star no attendance is taken, no grades or evaluations offered. Students learn

¹¹ Karen Rogers Holinga, "The Cycle of Transformation in Home School Families Over Time" (Ph.D. diss, Ohio State University, 1999). Gaither, *Homeschool*, 152-157.

about whatever they want. In 2006 students asked for and got tutoring in Greek mythology, historical interpretation, Shakespeare, prime numbers, martial arts, culture and belief, electronic music, dance, historical fiction, and much more. Most students engage in apprenticeships and internships in the local community. Though they receive no transcript or degree, to date 49 percent of alumni have been accepted to college and 49 percent have gotten full or part time jobs.¹²

Though disparate in tone and content, such co-ops and other hybrids have emerged at roughly the same time because by the late 1990s and 2000s the homeschooled population was aging. While large numbers of homeschooled kids transition to traditional schools in their teen years, homeschooling through high school has emerged as one of the most popular topics of discussion at conferences and on the internet in recent years. The number of homeschooled young children is beginning to plateau, but homeschooling for older children is still a high-growth market. The result has been an explosion in innovative programs for older children. “The home-school movement,” writes Peter Beinart, “has literally outgrown the home.” Beinart found that Wichita’s 1,500 homeschooling families had created “3 bands, a choir, a bowling group, a math club, a 4-H club, boy-&-girl-scout troops, a debate team, a yearly musical, two libraries and a cap-and-gown graduation.” Technically “homeschooled” children were meeting in warehouses or business centers for classes “in algebra, English, science, swimming, accounting, sewing, public speaking, and Tae Kwan Do.” Such programs blurring the boundaries between home and school have created tensions among some homeschoolers, however. Many with roots in

¹² Darla Isackson, “Mom Schools and Co-ops,” *Meridian: The Place Where Latter-Day Saints Gather*, 2004, <<http://www.meridianmagazine.com/ideas/050422schools.html>> (14 August 2007). Pamela A. Vaughan, “Case Studies of Homeschool Cooperatives in Southern New Jersey” (Ph.D. diss., Widener University, 2003). Daniel Robb, “Don’t Call it School,” *Teacher Magazine* 18, no. 3 (November/December 2006): 24-31.

conservative Protestantism have had trouble adjusting to the more worldly culture that often accompanies cooperatives, especially ambitious endeavors like sporting leagues and orchestras. Disagreements over “what kinds of uniforms are appropriate for home-school cheerleaders and whether rock music may be played at home-school events” are not uncommon as life-long homeschoolers rub shoulders with each other and with new recruits fresh from the public schools. Not a few Christian homeschoolers have pulled their children out of co-ops, clubs, and sports teams over such concerns. None of these small-scale culture skirmishes begin to match, however, the controversy generated by the growing popularity of government-sponsored programs for homeschoolers.¹³

Many public school districts, having lost the fight to criminalize homeschooling, now openly court homeschoolers. School districts with high rates of homeschooling have seen significant drops in funding, tied as it is to per-pupil enrollment. The Maricopa County school district in Mesa, AZ, for example, had lost \$34 million due to the exodus of 7,526 homeschoolers by the year 2000. In an effort to win some of them back, the district began offering a-la-carte services through satellite campuses at strip malls and other locations. Homeschoolers there have attended weekly enrichment classes in such subjects as sign language, art, karate, and modern dance. The district receives ¼ of each pupil’s government allocation for every student it enrolls in one of the classes. School districts across the country have begun similar programs. The state of Washington has been a national leader in establishing such partnerships, beginning with its “HomeLink” program in Battle Ground, WA in 1993 that provided computer assistance and eventually an array of classes for homeschoolers. Other districts throughout the state have followed suit. At the Homeschool Resource Center operated by the North Seattle Public School

¹³ Peter Beinart, “Home (School) Improvement,” *Time Magazine*, 26 October 1998, 6.

District, for example, homeschooled children can choose from a rotating menu of classes or just stop by to use the computer center or library. Other school districts around the country are experimenting with dual enrollment programs that allow students to homeschool for part of the day but take certain classes at the local public school. And homeschoolers have in recent years challenged and are increasingly overturning laws barring them from participation in high school sports and other extra-curricular activities offered by public schools.¹⁴

Hybridized forms of homeschooling extend to higher education as well. The College Board has seen a dramatic rise in homeschoolers who take Advanced Placement tests. 410 homeschooled students took them in 2000. 1,282 did so in 2005. Homeschooling diploma services have multiplied across the country, as have honor societies like the Houston-based Eta Sigma Alpha. Many states have begun to extend to homeschoolers the popular dual enrollment programs (sometimes called “Running Start”) that allow high school students to enroll for free in classes at local colleges. Florida and Washington are perhaps the national leaders in such programs, but other states are warming to the possibility.¹⁵

¹⁴ Flynn McRoberts, “The Economics of Karate,” *Newsweek*, 6 November 2000, 62. Richard S. Clayton, “Homeschool Families Forge Link with B.G. District,” *The Columbian*, 15 February 1998, *NewsBank Access World News* (3 June 2008). Jessica Blanchard, “Homeschool-public school bonds growing,” *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 21 December 2006, <http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/296689_homeschool21.htm> (3 June 2008). Peggy J. Farber, “The New Face of Homeschooling,” *Harvard Education Letter*, March/April 2001 <<http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2001-ma/homeschool.shtml>> (3 June 2008). Andrew Lawrence, “Out at Home? Barred from Sports, Some Homeschooled Kids are Fighting Back,” *Sports Illustrated*, 30 October 2006, 40.

¹⁵ Mary Ann Zehr, “More Home Schoolers Taking Advanced Placement Tests,” *Education Week*, 26 April 2006, 12. “Running Start Recent Changes,” *Washington Homeschool Organization*, 4 April 2008 <<http://www.washhomeschool.org/whoRunningStart.html>> (3 June 2008).

Not surprisingly, all of this innovation and experimentation at the secondary level, having increased the number of homeschooled high-schoolers, has led to a dramatic rise in application for admission to institutions of higher education by students without a traditional high school background. In 1986 ninety percent of the nation's colleges and universities had no explicit homeschooling admissions policy. A recent study found that by 2004 over seventy-five percent did and that the vast majority of admissions officers surveyed had very positive feelings about homeschooled applicants. Another recent study of the homeschool admissions policies of seventy-two colleges and universities and the subsequent performance by homeschooled students who were enrolled found that homeschoolers were generally happy with the way they were evaluated and universities were happy with the performance and graduation rates of the homeschoolers they admitted. It was all very normal.¹⁶

By far the most significant and most controversial of the new public/private hybrids is the Cybercharter movement. Cybercharter schools are only one of many forms of online home-based education that have emerged in recent years. Many public school districts and state educational agencies have been offering online education as a form of distance learning for years. The most innovative and successful of these programs is the Florida Virtual School (FVS), founded in 1997 and operated by the Florida Department of Education. It partners with all sixty-seven Florida school districts to bring a complete high-school curriculum moderated by certified teachers to the homes of residents across the state, many of whom live on isolated produce farms

¹⁶ Paul Jones and Gene Gloeckner, "Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Homeschooled Students" in *Journal of College Admission* 185 (Fall 2004): 19. Richard Joseph Bamo, "The Selection Process and Performance of Former Homeschooled Students at Pennsylvania's Four-Year Colleges and Universities" (Ed.D. diss., Lehigh University, 2003). Sean Callaway, "Unintended Admissions Consequences of Federal Aid for Homeschoolers" in *Journal of College Admission* 185 (Fall 2004): 22-28.

or ranches. In the 2006-07 school year over 52,000 students were enrolled in FVS. By 2006 twenty-one other states and several local districts had begun similar programs both to service homebound or other special needs students and as an effort to lure homeschoolers (and the tax dollars they represent) back into the public education system.¹⁷

More provocative have been online schools founded by private companies that have taken advantage of charter school laws in various states to make their services available for free to homeschoolers. The official title for such schools is “nonclassroom-based charters,” though they are more often referred to as “cybercharters” or “virtual charters.” They are of course only available in states that have passed charter school legislation, but where legal they have grown enormously. California was an early innovator in this regard, with virtual charter schools opening shortly after the Charter Schools Act was passed in 1992. By 2001 the state had 93 cybercharters serving over 30,000 students, which meant that over 200 million dollars of California’s public school budget was being paid to private firms offering homeschool curricula and technology. After it became clear that some of these outfits were making scandalous profits by offering very minimal services, California legislators passed SB 740, which imposed strict financial guidelines on cybercharters, including a requirement that they spend at least 50 percent of public revenues on salaries and benefits to state-certified teachers. The law also set limits on pupil-teacher ratios, required more expansive record-keeping, and imposed strict penalties for failing to meet these and other standards. Over the next few years several California charters

¹⁷ “Accreditation and History,” *Florida Virtual School*, 2006, <

http://www.flvs.net/general/accreditation_information.php> (14 August 2007). National Forum on Education-Statistics, *Forum Guide to Elementary/Secondary Virtual Education* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, 2006), 1-2.

failed to meet such requirements and saw their funding cut by 5 to 40 percent. Many did not survive, but the better schools flourished and have enjoyed consistent enrollment growth.¹⁸

By 2006 eighteen states had a combined total of 147 virtual charter schools educating over 65,000 students. Cybercharters in many of these states have faced growing pains similar to those in California. Initial charter school legislation had usually not anticipated the trend toward virtual charters and thus had provided no statutory language to regulate it. After a few years of unbridled innovation and not a little lawless profiteering, most states have tightened regulations and increased scrutiny of these programs, causing some of the first generation cybercharters to go out of business. More reputable organizations have prospered, however, leading to conflicts with other public schools. The Western Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School (WPCCS), for example, opened its virtual doors in the fall of 2000 as Pennsylvania's second cybercharter and the first to offer its services across district lines. In its first two months enrollment surged from 250 to over 500. Over half of those enrolled had previously been either homeschooled or had attended private schools. After nine months enrollment topped 1,100. Growth of such magnitude not surprisingly led to conflict. Many school districts, frustrated that they now had to pay an outside organization to educate students in their own districts, many of whom had not even attended public schools before, simply stopped making payments, causing WPCCS to lose nearly \$1 million in 2001. The PA Department of Education responded by withholding \$850,000 in state aid from sixty districts, sending the money directly to WPCCS. Lawsuits were filed by 23 districts across the state, and in May of 2001 Commonwealth Court senior Judge Warren Morgan ruled against the school districts. That did not stop complaints about WPCCS and several other

¹⁸ Luis A. Huerta *et al.*, "Cyber and Home School Charter Schools: Adopting Policy to New Forms of Public Schooling" in *Peabody Journal of Education* 81, no. 1 (2006): 103-139.

cybercharters operating in Pennsylvania, however, so in 2002 the State Legislature passed Act 88, shifting authorization of cybercharters from local districts to the Department of Education and setting more rigorous requirements and accountability measures. Some of PA's cyberschools, most notably TEACH-Einstein, had their charters revoked, and those that survived tightened their lines considerably, to the great frustration of the many formerly-independent homeschoolers lured by free computers and textbooks into these schools but resentful of the regulations and regimentation that seemed to increase every year. Nevertheless, the movement continues to grow. In the 2006-07 school year the state's eleven cybercharters enrolled about 17,000 students. WPCCS, now called PA Cyber, remained the largest: in 2008 it was employing 500 people to educate 8,5000 students on a \$60 million dollar budget.¹⁹

Cybercharters have many enemies. Many politicians and public school people agree with Texas Democratic Rep. Patrick Rose that "we ought not be in the business of supporting for-profit education. Any program that takes money out of our public schools would be against our better judgment." Profits have indeed been sweet for many cybercharters, operating as they do without extensive facilities and support staff, though advocates always stress the cost of developing curriculum, advertising, and computer networks, as well as the high turnover rate such schools typically endure. They also note that textbook suppliers have been making tremendous profits from public schools for decades. Some cybercharters have been criticized by public school advocates for supporting religious instruction with public monies. In the early

¹⁹ Andrew J. Rotherham, "Virtual Schools, Real Innovation," *New York Times*, 7 April 2006, sec. Op/Ed. Huerta, *et al.*, "Cyber and Home School Charter Schools," 124-135. Elanor Chute, "CyberSchool Begets an Education Empire," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 30 May 2006, sec. B. Joe Smydo, "Hearings to Focus on Cyber Charter Schools," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 31 July 2007, sec. B. Fred Miller, telephone conversation with author, 19 August 2008.

years of the movement cybercharters in some states allowed parents to purchase their own curricula, and many chose religious homeschooling materials. One Kansas public school district used the fundamentalist Bob Jones Complete curriculum for a short time in the statewide cybercharter it sponsored. Over time, however, state governments have clamped down on such activities. Carol Simpson, Alaska Department of Education program coordinator, noted that when the Interior Distance Education of Alaska program was started in 1997, “we bought nearly anything anyone wanted, including Bob Jones, Alpha Omega, A Beka, etc.” A few months later, however, “the Department of Education...made a new regulation prohibiting school districts from purchasing religious curriculum materials.” Charter schools are now, with rare exception, wholly secular.²⁰

Cybercharter advocates and entrepreneurs were not surprised at the criticism (and lawsuits, nearly all of which have been unsuccessful) they have been handed from public school districts, the National Education Association, Democratic legislators resistant to educational choice initiatives, and teachers’ unions. What has taken them off guard, however, is the vocal and bitter opposition to the trend among many leaders in the homeschooling community. Right wing and left wing homeschooling leaders who had not spoken to one another since the demise of their coalitions in the late 1980s have set aside longstanding feuds and grudges to forge a united protest against virtual schools. In 2003 dozens of homeschool leaders from a wide range of ideological positions signed a resolution condemning virtual charter schools called “We Stand for Homeschooling.” The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), the nation’s most

²⁰ Corey Murray, “States Grapple with Virtual School Legislation,” *eSchool News*, 22 May 2003, <
<http://www.eschoolnews.com/news/showstory.cfm?ArticleID=4419>> (14 August 2007). Chris Klicka, *Home School Heroes: The Struggle and Triumph of Home Schooling in America* (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2006), 279.

powerful homeschool advocacy organization, did not sign the statement but has heaped condemnation on cybercharters. HSLDA Senior Counsel Chris Klicka has called the virtual charter movement a “Trojan horse,” warning that “if anything can destroy the Christian homeschool movement, this will.” Elizabeth Smith, wife of HSLDA president Michael Smith, urged her audience of Protestant homeschool leaders in a 2007 address to pray against the “assault of the Enemy” that cybercharters represented: “if we will band together...through prayer...our groups will win.”²¹

Cybercharter backers have had difficulty understanding and responding to such criticism. Ron Packard, founder and CEO of K¹², a curriculum provider whose services reached over 25,000 students through virtual schools in 16 states and the District of Columbia in 2007, has been “shocked” by opposition coming from HSLDA. “It’s really amazing to me that a group that has fought so hard for the right to home school would oppose someone else’s parents who are fighting for their right to be doing at home a great public school education.” Packard noted with some frustration that “the same level of intolerance that you saw in the education establishment toward homeschooling, I think home schooling [groups] are showing toward us.” Homeschool movement leaders’ reactions do make sense, however. Though the political climate today is generally favorable toward homeschooling, veteran leaders have vivid memories of earlier days when homeschooling was not so easy. Their libertarian rhetoric has demonized government-run schooling for so long that it is very difficult for many of them to think in terms of new paradigms of co-operation and hybridization. Any rapprochement with government is by definition

²¹ “We Stand for Homeschooling,” 2003, <<http://westandforhomeschooling.org/res/index.php>> (15 August 2007).

Klicka, *Home School Heroes*, 275. Elizabeth Smith, “Homeschooling the Silent Revival,” presentation at National Christian Home Educators Leadership Conference, 2005.

capitulation to the enemy. Animus against government was what bound leftist and conservative Christian homeschoolers together in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and it is what has brought them back together to oppose virtual charters.²²

Moreover, for veteran Christian leaders especially, the cybercharter movement has cut in on their business. Chris Klicka explains how “even in independent-minded states like Idaho and Alaska” Christian homeschoolers are enrolling in cybercharters “by the thousands. They are attending government homeschool conferences (where Christ or God cannot be mentioned) and receiving the secular, government homeschool newsletters. They no longer go to the Christian homeschool conventions.” Christian curriculum providers have lost market share as well. Tens of thousands of Christian homeschoolers who would otherwise be purchasing Christian curricula as independent homeschoolers now receive non-religious, government sanctioned curriculum for free through cybercharters. It is only natural that Christian companies would resent such a move and interpret it as a clandestine effort by the secularist State to destroy them. Despite the united front of opposition, however, with studies of established virtual charters finding high levels of parent satisfaction and student achievement, it is highly unlikely that independent homeschoolers and advocates for traditional public schools will be able to stop them.²³

²² “K¹² Fact Sheet,” *K¹² Inc.*, 2007, <http://www.k12.com/press__policy/k12_fact_sheet> (16 August 2007). Jeffrey Kwitowski, “RE: K12 enrollment data,” 22 August 2007, personal email (22 August 2007). Jessica Cantelon, “Virtual Charter Schools Face Opposition from Unlikely Source,” *Cybercast News Service*, CNS News.com, 13 August 2002, <<http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewNation.asp?Page=%5C%5CNation%5C%5Carchive%5C%5C200208%5C%5CNA%5C%5CT20020813b.html>> (16 August 2007).

²³ Klicka, *Home School Heroes*, 275. Carol Klein, *Virtual Charter Schools and Home Schooling* (Youngstown: Cambria Press, 2006), 91-95, 115-122.

The stress we have placed in this article on the increasing diversity of homeschoolers and of institutional configurations should not obscure the fact that many who homeschool still choose this option out of frustration with or protest against formal, institutional schooling and seek to offer an alternative, usually conservative Christian, worldview to their children by teaching them at home. The Christian homeschooling movement is still alive and well and growing “by both conversion and conception.” Yet it is the case that increasing numbers who opt to homeschool do so as an accessory, hybrid, temporary stop-gap, or out of necessity given their circumstances, and it is this newer group of homeschoolers who are challenging the historic dichotomies between public and private, school and home, formal and informal that have played such an important role in the movement’s self-definition and in American education policy. Trends toward accommodation, adaptation, and hybridization such as we have discussed here will likely increase as U.S. education policy seeks to catch up to the sweeping demographic, technological, and economic changes that characterize our society today. A movement born in opposition to public schools ironically might offer public education its most promising reform paradigm for the 21st century.²⁴

²⁴ James C. Carper, “Homeschooling *Redivivus*: Accomodating the Anabaptists of American Education,” in James C. Carper and Thomas C. Hunt, eds., *The Dissenting Tradition in American Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 260.