

Proposing a Path Forward:

A Report on Pennsylvania's Homeschool Policy in Times of Learning Disruption and Practice

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Education

Introduction to the PA Homeschool Policy

I was interested in investigating the Pennsylvania (PA) homeschool policy because studies have shown that homeschooling is the fastest-growing form of education, and it is becoming increasingly popular among parents dissatisfied with public schools, such as concerns about bullying, lack of resources for special needs children, and limited acceptance of diverse identities (Jamison et al., 2023). This paper aims to thoroughly examine the homeschool policy in Pennsylvania (PA), including its historical background and contemporary iteration. It also incorporates findings from research on how this policy affects students and parents as teachers. By utilizing two policy frameworks (mandates and system-changing), this paper assesses the design and underlying assumptions of the PA homeschool policy. It also discusses lingering questions and unresolved issues that could be explored in future studies.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has a homeschool policy that targets homeschooled parents, socially constructed as advantaged and positive, having the required qualifications and willpower to homeschool their children. The advantaged groups have the resources and capacity to shape their own constructions and to combat attempts that would portray them negatively (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, 337, par.2). However, the policy aims to change the behavior of homeschooling parents to ensure that they possess the skills and capacity to facilitate instruction

and teach the right content at the right time and to ensure that learning is taking place. Section 1327.1 of the Pennsylvania's School Code provides for a home education program that allows a parent, guardian, or legal custodian ("supervisor") with a high school diploma or its equivalent to conduct a home education program for his or her child or children. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023). In addition, I unraveled how the PA homeschool policy could support parents in enhancing their expertise, knowledge, and resources to support students acutely, exploring various teaching and learning options implicit in the policy.

During the 2021-2022 academic year, at least one homeschooled student existed for every 10 public school students in 390 districts across the United States. This is four times the number of districts with such rates in 2017-2018, indicating a significant shift in how communities educate their children and a challenge for a public education system that had decreasing enrollment even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Jamison et al., 2023). One significant outcome of the coronavirus pandemic was the disruption in regular attendance for children at both public and private schools (Price et al., 2021). Additionally, acute health issues as highlighted by Thorpe et al. (2011) can affect the operations of school systems.

According to Ray (2023), about 6% of school-aged children were homeschooled during the 2021-2022 school year, equating to about 3.1 million students in grades K through 12 in the United States. The homeschool population had been growing at an estimated 2% to 8% per annum over the past several years, but it grew drastically from 2019-2020 to 2020-2021. Thus, I put forward that parents opting for homeschooling should always consider carefully their short-term and long-term goals. By homeschooling, parents can ensure their children meet minimum standards in the short term while also developing essential skills like creativity, communication, and collaboration that will prepare them well for college or the workforce in the long term.

The policy theory can work in practice, but policymakers may want parents to teach at the pace of private or public schools and use the schools' approaches to address the impact of any disruptive learning. This event related to the pandemic is what Stone (2011, p.171) called the story of metaphor “Embedded in every policy metaphor is an assumption that if *a* is like *b*, then the way to solve *a* is to do what you would do to solve *b*.” However, multiple sources suggest that there are reasons, issues, and trends in homeschooling in the United States that policymakers need to consider. According to Stone (2011, p.183, par.1), most policy discussions begin with a recitation of figures purporting to show that a problem is big or growing, or both. Critiquing the PA homeschool policy and its potential effects can help policymakers design implementation and evaluation studies for the PA home education program to ensure that it supports students from diverse backgrounds.

Historical Overview of How PA Homeschool Policy Came About

I examined and discussed the history of Pennsylvania's homeschooling policy through the lens of Stone's symbols and numbers framework. According to Stone (2011) in *Symbols*, symbols are often used to tell stories. They enable people to share their experiences and convey meaning. Stone further defined symbols as anything that stands for something else, and its meaning depends on how people interpret it, use it, or respond to it (Stone, 2011, p.157, par. 3). Stone identified three symbolic devices in policy politics: stories, synecdoche, and metaphor. Stories entail narratives with heroes and villains, problems and solutions, tensions, and resolutions, and the most common recurring themes are change (stories of decline, including stories of stymied progress, illusory progress, and stories of rising and progress) and power (stories of control, including the story of helplessness, conspiracy story, and the blame-the-victim story). These are a vital part of human nature. Synecdoche refers to when a small part of a

policy problem represents the whole, while metaphor is when one policy problem is likened to another. Common metaphors in policy politics include organisms, disease, natural laws, machines, wedges, containers, and wars (p.159). Stone (2011, p.183, par.1) in *Numbers* examines the implications of defining policy problems only by measurement. Stone emphasized that policy discussions often begin with a recitation of figures purporting to show that a problem is big, growing, or both. Stone's symbols and numbers framework guided me in choosing appropriate materials or studies and understand how different authors account for the events and trends of homeschooling in Pennsylvania.

Homeschooling may be more accurately described as "home-based education." This approach involves parents taking on the responsibility of raising and instructing their children. It is typically family-based and led by parents or students themselves. Through this method, individualized learning is encouraged, and classes are usually not held in traditional classroom or institutional environments (Lines, 1998, as cited in Ray, 2000, p.1). Homeschooling families often participate in community activities and use resources open to the public to enhance the education of the children. According to Ray (2016), homeschooling has been in existence in the United States, particularly during the colonial period. During this time, parents were the main academic instructors of their children, and they taught them not only reading, writing, and arithmetic but also values, morals, and religious instruction (Cremin 1970, as cited in Ray, 2016). Most of the children's education during this period was conducted at home. Hence, homeschooling has gained popularity in the late 20th and early 21st centuries due to concerns about the neutrality of public schools in teaching values and worldview.

As per Rucker (2020), homeschooling in Pennsylvania used to be illegal, but courageous parents fought for their right to educate their children at home. In the 1970s,

parents began questioning public education and the differences in belief systems, leading them to pull their children out of school. Early homeschoolers faced opposition and persecution from school districts, with some families even being threatened with jail time. Early homeschoolers in Pennsylvania were subject to the regulations enforced by their respective school districts, each having its own unique set of rules. However, in 1988, a homeschool law was passed in Pennsylvania, making homeschooling legal (Eagleson, 2020; Ray, 2016; Rucker, 2020). Over the years, changes have been made to the law to make it less burdensome for families. The Christian Homeschool Association of Pennsylvania (CHAP) has been instrumental in advocating for homeschoolers' rights and continues to fight for homeschool freedom in the state. Currently, there is a battle concerning the compulsory age for schooling in Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2020), and CHAP is actively involved in supporting legislation to reduce the burden on homeschooled families.

CHAP was founded in the early 1980s and played a significant role in the legalization and protection of homeschooling in Pennsylvania. Before the establishment of public schools, parents were primarily responsible for their children's education. However, by the mid-1800s, the "common school" system became the norm as the center of a child's education rather than the home, and this movement developed into the public school system (Eagleson, 2020).

Studies revealed that in 1982, homeschooling gained attention through broadcasts by Focus on the Family. Eagleson (2020) mentioned that:

A young mother (Mary Ann) reached for her small radio and headset as she organized herself to feed the baby in the middle of the night. It was her firstborn, a precious girl, and they both settled in as the music for Focus on the Family began to play. This was early 1982. As the mom drifted between sleep and consciousness, she

listened to that opening music and the host's introductory comments. It soon became clear that the host and the guest were talking about teaching our children at home. The topic woke the mom up out of her stupor. "What in the world is that?" she mused. As she listened, along with thousands of other parents interested in this possibility, the Lord expanded the birthing of a new movement across America and beyond. The guest and others like him, before and in the days ahead, shared information about this new movement. The young mom's family and the lives of thousands of others, who were listening that night and to subsequent broadcasts, were impacted by Focus on the Family's efforts to make these voices heard. Soon many other avenues began sharing this concept of educating our children (pp.1-2).

This conscious attention to homeschooling has sparked a surge in support groups, including the Lancaster County Home Education Association (L'CHEA) formed in 1986. The first L'CHEA annual convention in 1986 was aptly called "Come and See" and drew 200 participants. As responsibilities grew, L'CHEA became a formal non-profit organization in 1991 and later changed its name to the Christian Homeschool Association of Pennsylvania (CHAP) in 1994. Fast forward to 2017, the CHAP convention (Eagleson, 2020) is now held annually at the stunning Lancaster County Convention Center, located in downtown Pennsylvania.

The Christian Homeschool Association of Pennsylvania (CHAP) played a significant role in protecting the rights of homeschooling parents in the state. In 1994, they worked with thousands of concerned individuals to oppose a bill (HR 6) that would have required teaching certificates for all homeschooling parents. In 2000, CHAP founded CHAP HELP (Home Educators Lobbying Program) to educate legislators about homeschooling and advocate for more freedom in homeschooling law. They monitored bills and played a role in introducing HB 2560

in 2022, which aimed for less oversight of homeschoolers by school districts, but it died in committee due to a lack of unity between nearly one thousand homeschoolers Red Team (also known as Red Seas) who supports and about one hundred homeschoolers Blue Team who opposed the bill. In 2014, CHAP and other homeschooling advocates worked to lessen the workload on parents created by homeschooling laws. Currently, a representative from CHAP reads about 360 bills a year and CHAP continues to monitor bills and other legislative issues related to homeschooling freedom (Eagleson, 2020; Rucker, 2020) and provide support and resources for homeschooling families.

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) is another prominent organization, founded in 1983 by Michael Farris and J. Michael Smith in Purcellville, Virginia. As a 501(c)(3) nonprofit advocacy group, it has been steadfast in its efforts to support homeschoolers (HSLDA, 2019). In addition, homeschoolers often collaborate with support groups to safeguard their rights and tackle any issues that may arise. CHAP worked with sympathetic legislators and the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) to advocate for homeschooling rights and law. The formation of some Pennsylvania homeschoolers and their leadership worked together with CHAP and HSLDA and successfully lobbied for the legalization of homeschooling in Pennsylvania from September 1984 to the end of 1988 and fought against restrictive legislation in Congress (Eagleson, 2020; Rucker 2020). In 1988, homeschooling became legal in Pennsylvania. Over the years, these organizations have acted as the primary point of contact for homeschoolers regarding policy issues and concerns.

Summary of Extant Research on Homeschool Policy Clearly Delineating between Implementation and Evaluation Studies

Over the years, several studies have been conducted to implement or evaluate homeschooling practices and their impacts on student outcomes. Below is a summary of some of the most notable studies.

Cheng and Hamlin's (2023) implementation study on *Contemporary Homeschooling Arrangements: An Analysis of Three Waves of Nationally Representative Data* delved into homeschooling trends and how homeschooled parents (street-level bureaucrats) from diverse backgrounds use private tutors and cooperative instructors to supplement their instruction. By analyzing the quantitative data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Household Education Survey administered to 1,468 homeschooled families, the authors found that traditional homeschooling is on the decline (p. 1462) while home education supplemented by online resources, part-time attendance at brick-and-mortar schools, and cooperative instructors are on the rise in the southern region. The authors suggested that this contemporary homeschooling practice, along with regulatory policy, raises questions for public school systems on how they can make school available for families with a child with special needs, possibly through part-time attendance or participation in school-based activities.

Hamlin and Cheng's (2022) study on *Homeschooling, Perceived Social Isolation, and Life Trajectories: An Analysis of Formerly Homeschooled Adults* served as both an implementation and evaluation analysis of homeschooling (p. 338). The evaluation part focuses on student outcomes, like college attendance, household income, marital status, and subjective well-being. The implementation part focused on conventional and unconventional social experiences reported by participants, providing insights that could be used to enhance homeschooling

practices (pp. 354-355). For instance, the study found that children can play an integral role in the decision to either continue or discontinue homeschooling. Formerly homeschooled adults mentioned having some control over their education decisions. While theoretical debates argue homeschooling may limit children's rights, interviews in the study indicate that homeschooled children have authority over their education. The analyses of data collected from the parents of the adults/ homeschool teachers (street-level bureaucrats) revealed that they were able to navigate mainstream school-based social activities even though they had less exposure to mainstream social opportunities offered in brick-and-mortar schools. The study used interviews and survey data from the adults to reach these conclusions.

Hamline's (2019) implementation study on *Do Homeschooled Students Lack Opportunities to Acquire Cultural Capital? Evidence from a Nationally Representative Survey of American Households* examined the extent to which homeschooled parents teach humanities subjects like art, music, and foreign languages and provide their children with cultural experiences. Data was collected from the National Household Education Survey that was administered to 552 homeschooled households. The study found that nearly 60% of homeschooled households reported teaching at least three of the four humanities subjects, and 40% were unable to provide instruction due to a lack of resources (pp.324-325). The results also revealed that learning humanities fosters cultural awareness and promotes family activities. Furthermore, parents with a university degree were more likely to participate in cultural and family activities, such as visiting museums and art galleries, going to bookstores and libraries, and attending live artistic performances, which are often used as a measure of cultural capital. Furthermore, higher rates of participation in cultural and family activities reported for homeschooled families may suggest that homeschooled students have opportunities to acquire cultural capital outside of formal

instructional time. Participation in these types of activities may thus play a compensatory role, possibly offsetting what may be forfeited by not attending a traditional brick-and-mortar school (p.324). This implies that additional effort and intentional actions are required to determine if participation in cultural and family activities is equivalent to cultural capital developed through experiences at school.

Hanna's (2012) implementation study on *Homeschooling Education: Longitudinal Study of Methods, Materials, and Curricula* was a 10-year longitudinal research study that examined the demographics, methods, materials, curriculum, and motivations of Pennsylvania homeschooling families. The study began in 1998, covering 25 districts, and used interviews and questionnaires to collect data from 250 families. By 2008, the data was compiled, offering an accurate depiction of each family's homeschooling efforts (p.617). The author found that homeschoolers today are more selective in their methods and materials and operate on a much larger scale than in the mid-1990s (p. 627). Hence, the study looked at how homeschooling plays out in practice and how it has changed over time.

Finally, Price et. al. (2021) research on *It's Not Homeschool, It's School at Home: Parents' Experiences as Teachers During the COVID-19 Pandemic* was an implementation study that used email interviews with homeschooled parents (street-level bureaucrats) to explore their response to COVID-19 school closures. The findings provided valuable information on how schools and communities can handle similar situations in the future (p.117). The researchers conducted a thematic analysis of oral history, a qualitative interview method focusing on participants' experiences, opinions and perspectives, memories and events, attitudes, values, and beliefs. This method typically includes multiple open-ended interview sessions with each participant (Leavy, 2011). The objective was to understand parents' viewpoints and experiences

and to convey essential themes to education policymakers and administrators. The study highlighted key themes concerning curriculum and learning settings, communication and school assistance, and financial constraints. Parents encountered difficulties with technology, equipment, and educational platforms. The study offers suggestions for districts and parents to enhance readiness for virtual classrooms in the future. Furthermore, districts should actively involve parents in the decision-making process and keep them informed.

Application of at Least Two Frameworks Discussed in Class to Analyze the Design of the PA Homeschool Policy and Its Assumptions

Learning Frameworks

The Pennsylvania (PA) homeschool policy is primarily composed of mandates and system-changing that offer direction to homeschooled parents. The policy's mandates specify what parents need to teach, the rules they must follow, the required hours of instruction per year, and the option to document days instead. It also provides recommendations for maintaining a portfolio and mentions the requirement to submit a portfolio until the age of 18 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2023, pp. 24-25). To ensure that learning is taking place, parents must teach 180 days or 900 hours at the elementary school and 180 days or 990 hours at the secondary level, standardized tests must be administered at specific grade levels, and an annual written assessment of the child's progress must be conducted. Additionally, parents must file a notarized affidavit or unsworn declaration, have a child evaluated by a qualified evaluator, and submit the evaluator's certification to the superintendent by June 30. Furthermore, parents must have at least a high school diploma or its equivalent to teach in a homeschool (HSLDA, 2020).

System-changing is another key tool in the PA homeschool policy. Homeschooled parents who lack political influence and wish to maintain their access are more likely to report work hours and test results that may not be an accurate reflection of their child's abilities. This is due to a perverse incentive to cheat or inflate numbers, which unintentionally produces an undesirable outcome despite being created with good intentions. As Stone (2011, p.188, par.1) argues, every number is an assertion about similarities and differences, and it is impossible to count without making judgments about categorization. This raises questions about what counts as a work hour, such as whether driving a child to the grocery store and shopping should be considered a school lesson, e.g., English, social studies, or mathematics lesson. In addition, homeschooling parents who meet program requirements would transfer authority over their children's learning back to the government, as the superintendent may request additional documentation or discontinue the program if they believe the child is not properly educated. Furthermore, parents can challenge the school district's decision at a hearing, but if they decide to reenroll their child in public school, the appropriate grade placement will be determined based on the coursework completed during homeschooling (Education Law Center, 2014). As a result, parents must adhere to reporting guidelines, report student progress within a certain timeframe, and have their activities monitored to maintain their homeschool status.

The PA homeschool policy aims to ensure that parents have the necessary skills to facilitate instruction and are teaching the right content at the right time. The target population is homeschooled parents, who are socially constructed as advantaged and have the required qualifications and willpower to homeschool their children. The policy is also attempting to change the parents' behavior to guarantee that learning is taking place. In addition, advantaged parents who are strong politically, financially, and socially could overturn or influence

government policy (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Ultimately, the students are the beneficiaries of the policy because they gain awareness, specific knowledge, skills, and abilities or attitudes that students are expected to attain by the end of a learning experience or program of study. The policy is not directly influenced by wealth but implicitly affected by the fact that parents without high school qualifications might feel unimportant for their children to benefit from their experiences. In conclusion, the PA homeschooling requirements aim to ensure that parents are equipped enough to teach and provide the right instruction and attention to students.

Theory of Change

Problem

The homeschooling trend emerged in the 1980s when many Christian parents began to question whether public schools were the best option or a good choice for their children, given the differences in belief systems. This led to an increase in the number of homeschooled students across the United States. The desire to avoid a one-size-fits-all education and the desire for a faith-based approach to learning led parents across the nation to pull their children out of school (Rucker, 2020, p.2). However, some believe that public schools do not teach children about sectarian values, beliefs, and worldviews, leading to the growth of homeschooling as an alternative to mainstream education. Parents who homeschool their children must play the role of sole teachers, which can lead to social isolation and other challenges, such as time management, finances, selecting the right curriculum, and keeping the child engaged. Despite these challenges, many students desired to be homeschooled during the COVID-19 pandemic and wanted to be taught by their parents (Price et al., 2021). Homeschooling has gained popularity worldwide, but it is not without its drawbacks. It challenges the state's authority to educate citizens and raises concerns about child protection issues, social awareness, and educational outcomes.

Solution

Some parents prefer to educate their children themselves instead of sending them to public schools. While this may work for some, others may not be equipped to provide effective education. The PA homeschool policy aims to address this issue by setting minimum standards to allow the former but address the latter. The policy encourages self-reported academic records, student engagement in the community, and customized learning environments. To comply with the minimum standards, parents must provide 180 days or 900 hours of instruction in grades K-6, and 990 hours in grades 7-12. A portfolio of reading materials and work samples must be maintained, along with standardized test results in grades 3, 5, and 8.

Short-term and Long-term Goals

The homeschool policy aims to achieve significant goals in both the short and long term. In the short term, the policy aims to increase student involvement in the community, foster interpersonal relationships, and enable students to learn about values and beliefs directly from their parents. In the long term, homeschooling aims to help students develop social skills such as self-awareness and inter – intrapersonal relationships. Additionally, homeschooled children will be prepared for national standardized testing, college, or the workforce. This policy also seeks to promote student and parent interactions, academic achievement, and community building.

Key Assumptions

The Pennsylvania homeschool policy is based on several key assumptions that have significant implications for both parents and students. Firstly, the policy assumes that homeschooled students can only acquire knowledge or skills when a parent possesses a high school diploma or its equivalent (GED certificate). This can result in an overemphasis on testing as the primary means of assessing student progress. It may also lead to a reduced focus on other

important skills, such as creativity, communication, and collaboration. Secondly, parents who lack high school qualifications may feel undervalued or uninvolved in their children's education. Additionally, homeschooled parents may exaggerate their reporting of student progress and achievements. Although the state controls standardized test scores, requiring parents to turn them in ensures that they pay attention to their children's education. In 2019, a bill was passed that made changes to the PA Act 16, which in turn amended the Public School Code in Pennsylvania, updating the definition of compulsory school age. As of the 2020-21 academic year, children must now be enrolled in school no later than age six and are required to attend school until age 18 or graduation, whichever comes first. In addition, as of July 1, 2020, children may no longer withdraw from school at age 17 (Education Law Center, 2019; Sharp & Ferenz, 2020). This bill creates an additional burden on parents who choose to homeschool in that homeschooled parents will need to create additional time for their children to receive appropriate instruction until they turn 18 years old or before graduation. Moreover, there could be oversubscription in teaching mathematics and reading, or language arts due to mandatory test reports. Students may also be tested beyond what they learned from their parents. Furthermore, homeschooled children may have difficulty with feelings of social isolation. While homeschooled students are not socially isolated, social introversion is viewed negatively. Lastly, whether homeschooled parents were ever certified teachers is not notably or significantly related to their children's academic achievement in homeschooling (Ray, 2023). In addition, school is not only about instructing students in knowledge and skills, as many parents and the public believe.

A Discussion of Lingering Questions about this Policy that Future Research Could Address

Based on the foregoing, I have come up with some lingering questions about the Pennsylvania homeschool policy that require further research. I believe the following areas are

worth investigating or exploring to gain insight, enhance understanding, and refine homeschooling in the state:

- How do homeschool parents select and implement appropriate curricula? To what extent do they collaborate with other homeschooling families?
- How does the compulsory age for schooling in Pennsylvania (PA Act 16) impact homeschooled children's natural learning ability?
- What is the effect of media and activities on homeschoolers? How can homeschoolers be better informed about the current homeschool policy?
- Is there a relationship between access to information and the location of homeschoolers?
- How can policymakers be more attentive to marginalized voices in homeschool debates?

Answering these questions can lead to a better understanding of how the Pennsylvania homeschool system can be improved for the benefit of school districts, teachers, parents, and students from various backgrounds and locations. While striving to maintain this balance, it is essential to address ethical dilemmas. This includes situations where parents might provide inaccurate information about their child's abilities and how to determine the state's responsibility in ensuring students' academic success in such cases. Additionally, addressing concerns about student withdrawals from public schools and maintaining a learning environment that can better serve the needs of students raises further questions about state responsibility and parent accountability. Given the increase in homeschooling, the diminishing backing for public education (Natanson, 2022), and the growing emphasis on parental rights in education (PA Family, 2024), these issues are becoming more critical, and requiring immediate attention.

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