

Background

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Homeschooling: A Growing Option in American Education

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A growing number of American families are choosing to homeschool their children. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reports that approximately 1.1 million children (2.2 percent of school-age children) were being educated at home as of 2003—29 percent more than the 850,000 students who were being homeschooled in 1998.¹ Another estimate projects that 2 million or more children may be homeschooling.²

Families cite common reasons for choosing to homeschool their children, such as concern about the environment at other schools, dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at other schools, and a preference for providing religious and moral instruction not provided in traditional schools.³

The decentralized nature of the homeschooling population limits researchers' ability to draw conclusions about the specific effect of homeschooling on various outcome measures such as academic achievement. However, evaluations of homeschooled students have reported that homeschool students perform well in that academic environment. Moreover, a survey of adults who were homeschooled suggests that homeschooling leads to positive life outcomes, such as higher college attendance and enrollment.⁴

The growing number of students being educated at home is also influencing the American education system and saving taxpayers between \$4.4 billion and \$9.9 billion in instructional costs each year.

The percentage of homeschooled students will likely continue to grow. Technological and societal

Talking Points

- As many as 2 million students are being educated at home in the United States.
- Families cite common reasons for homeschooling their children, such as concern about the environment at other schools, dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at other schools, and a preference for providing religious and moral instruction.
- Research about the effectiveness of homeschooling is limited, but the evidence suggests that many homeschooled students succeed in that learning environment and do well later in life.
- The families who choose to homeschool their children save taxpayers at least \$4.4 billion and \$9.9 billion in instructional costs annually, which would be spent on their children if they were enrolled in taxpayer-funded public schools.
- Federal and state policymakers should protect families' right to homeschool their children and should reform education and tax policies to give families greater ability to direct their children's education.

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trends may make homeschooling a viable option for a growing number of American families. Federal and state policymakers and the private sector have an opportunity to safeguard homeschooling and improve the opportunities for families to give their children the best possible education at home.

Homeschooling in the United States

Homeschooling is an alternative form of education in which children are instructed at home rather than at a traditional public or private school. Children who are homeschooled are instructed by parents, guardians, or other tutors.

Historically, home education has been a primary method for parents to educate their children.⁵ Many of America's Founders were educated at home, including George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Over time, the rise of compulsory education laws in the United States eroded the prevalence of home instruction.⁶ However, since the 1970s and 1980s, homeschooling has gradually again become a popular method of instruction.

During this time, homeschooling advocates have pressed for the legal right to forgo compulsory school attendance and educate their children at home, but not without opposition. For example, the National Education Association has advocated placing restrictions on homeschooling. At its 2007 annual meeting, it approved a resolution calling for tighter regulation of homeschooling: "When home schooling occurs...[i]nstruction should be by persons who are licensed by the appropriate state edu-

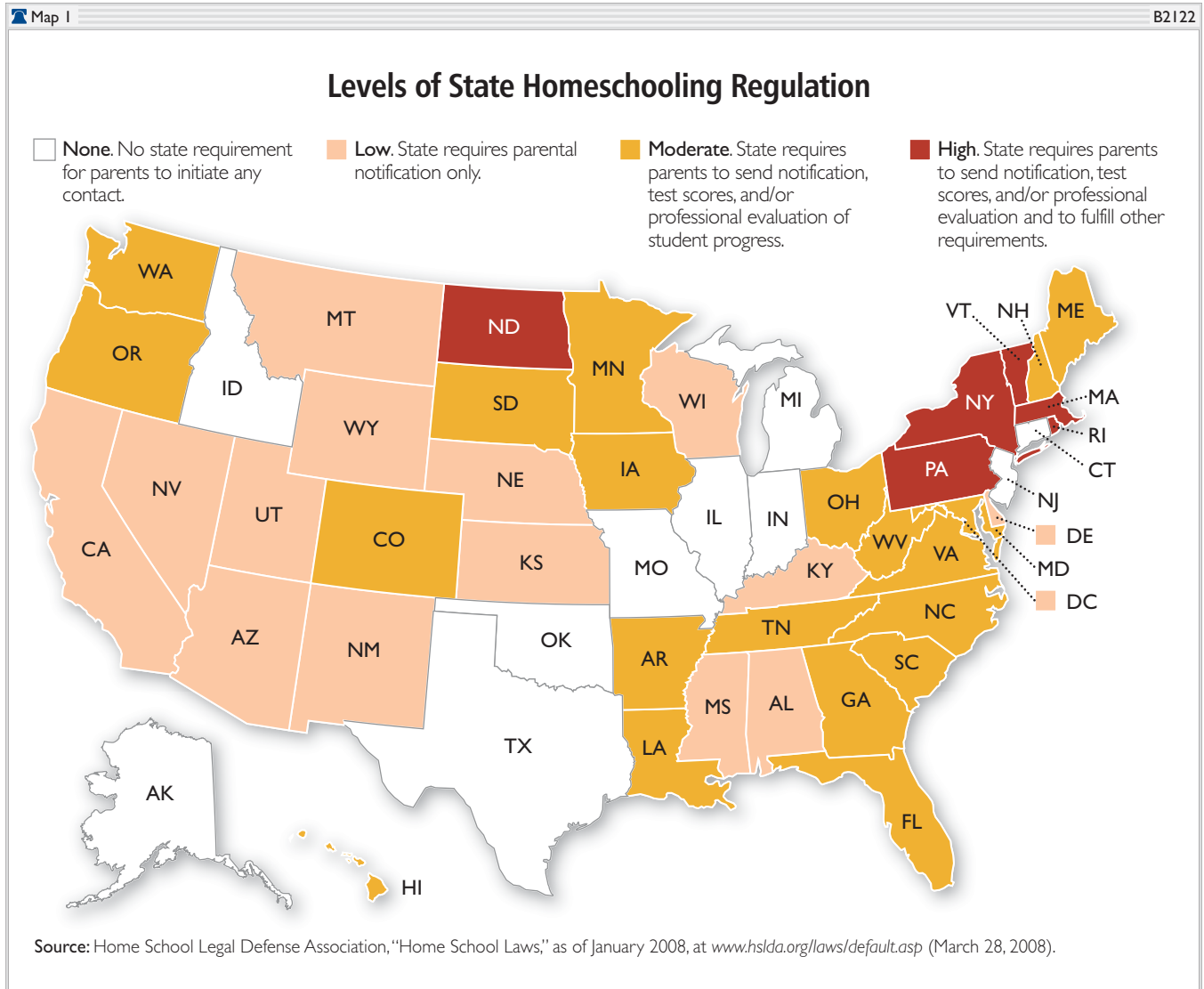
cation licensure agency, and a curriculum approved by the state department of education should be used."⁷ However, such efforts to restrict or tightly regulate homeschooling have largely failed. Today, homeschooling is legal in every state.

The Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), a nonprofit organization that advocates for homeschooling, rates the degree to which states regulate homeschooling. According to the HSLDA, 10 states require no notice from homeschoolers; 15 states have "low regulation" (requiring only parental notification); 20 states have "moderate regulations"; and six states have "high regulation." (See Map 1.)

The establishment of legal homeschooling rights across the country has facilitated strong growth in the number of children being educated at home. The decentralized nature of the homeschoolers makes estimating the homeschool population difficult. According to the Department of Education, approximately 1.1 million students (2.2 percent of the school-age population) were being educated at home in 2003, compared to an estimated 850,000 students in 1999. This estimate is extrapolated from a national survey of school-age students. Of the estimated 1.1 million students, 200,000 were also enrolled in school part-time.⁸

Yet the Department of Education's estimate may be too low. The National Home Education Research Institute estimates that between 1.9 million and 2.4 million children were educated at home during the 2005–2006 school year. Despite these differences, both the Department of Education and the National

1. National Center for Education Statistics, "Homeschooling in the United States: 2003," NCES 2006–042, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, February 2006, at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2006/2006042.pdf> (March 28, 2008).
2. Brian D. Ray, "Research Facts on Homeschooling," National Home Education Research Institute, July 10, 2006, at www.neri.org/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=199 (January 14, 2008).
3. National Center for Education Statistics, "Homeschooling in the United States."
4. Brian D. Ray, "Homeschooling Grows Up," Home School Legal Defense Association, 2003, at www.hslda.org/research/ray2003/HomeschoolingGrowsUp.pdf (January 14, 2006).
5. For a discussion of the history of homeschooling in education, see Andrew J. Coulson, *Market Education: The Unknown History* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1999), pp. 119–122.
6. Home School Legal Defense Association, "You Can Homeschool: Introduction," at www.youcanhomeschool.org/starthere/default.asp?bhcp=1 (January 16, 2007).
7. National Education Association, "Home Schooling," Resolution B-75, in "2006–2007 NEA Resolutions," p. 36, at www.nea.org/annualmeeting/raaction/images/resolutions2006-2007.pdf (February 1, 2008).
8. National Center for Education Statistics, "Homeschooling in the United States," p. 3, Table 1.



Home Education Research Institute concluded that the homeschooling population is increasing each year. The institute estimates that the number of children being homeschooled grows 7 percent to 12 percent per year.⁹

The Department of Education survey provides background on homeschooling families. White students were more likely to be homeschooled than African-American or Hispanic students. Children in two-parent families with only one parent in the

workforce were also more likely to be homeschooled.¹⁰ Children from families with annual household incomes below \$75,000 were more likely to be homeschooled than children with families who earned more than that amount each year. Participation was also higher among families with at least one parent who had earned a college degree.¹¹

The Department of Education survey also sheds light on families' reasons for homeschooling. Parents cited a number of common reasons for choosing to

9. Ray, "Research Facts on Homeschooling."

10. National Center for Education Statistics, "Homeschooling in the United States," p. 28, Table A3.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 27, Table A2.

homeschool: “concern about the environment of other schools” (85 percent); “dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools” (68 percent); and a preference “to provide religious and moral instruction” (72 percent).¹²

Academic Achievement and Other Outcomes

The decentralized nature of the homeschooling population makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about academic achievement and other outcomes. No controlled experiments have been conducted comparing the performance of homeschooled students with the performance of their peers in traditional schools. Without a controlled experiment, drawing definite conclusions about the effectiveness of homeschooling as a method of instruction compared to traditional schooling is impossible. However, a number of researchers have evaluated the performance of homeschoolers on various measures and have reported that homeschooled students seem to be doing well in their learning environment.

Academic Achievement. The academic literature on the relationship between homeschooling and academic achievement outcomes is limited, but the largest evaluation of homeschooled students’ academic achievement found that they were doing well in their learning environments. In 1998, Dr. Lawrence Rudner of the University of Maryland administered academic achievement tests to 20,760 homeschooled students. He reported that “the achievement tests of this group of home school students are exceptionally high—the median scores were typically in the 70th to 80th percentile.” He also found that 25 percent of the homeschooled students tested are enrolled one or more grade levels above their age-level

peers in traditional public or private schools. Rudner cautions that the results of his evaluation do not demonstrate that homeschooling is superior to public or private education, but he does state that the findings suggest that “home school students do quite well in that environment.”¹³

College Preparedness. In 2004, Dr. Paul Jones and Dr. Gene Gloeckner published an evaluation of first-year college performance of homeschoolers and traditional public school students in *The Journal of College Admissions*.¹⁴ They summarized the available academic literature and reported that the evidence showed that homeschoolers performed as well as traditional public school students on college preparatory exams and in first-year college grade point averages. The researchers conducted their own experiment and found no statistical difference between homeschool graduates and traditional high school graduates on nine measures of college preparedness. “The academic performance analyses,” concluded the authors, “indicate that home school graduates are as ready for college as traditional high school graduates and that they perform as well on national college assessment tests as traditional high school graduates.”¹⁵

Life Outcomes. Evidence also suggests that homeschoolers experience positive life outcomes compared to the general population. In 2003, Dr. Brian Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute surveyed 7,300 adults (ages 18 through 24) who were homeschooled. Among the respondents, 74 percent had taken college-level courses, compared to 46 percent of the general population. They also reported being involved in their communities and engaged in civic affairs at higher rates than the average population.¹⁶ They were also more likely to report being “happy” than was the general population. Although this survey is not a scientific

12. *Ibid.*, p. 13, Table 4.

13. Lawrence M. Rudner, “Scholastic Achievement and Demographic Characteristics of Home School Students in 1998,” University of Maryland, March 23, 1999.

14. Paul Jones and Gene Gloeckner, “First-Year College Performance: A Study of Home School Graduates and Traditional School Graduates,” *The Journal of College Admissions*, Vol. 183 (Spring 2004), pp. 17–20.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Brian Ray, “Homeschooling Grows Up,” Home School Legal Defense Association, 2003, at www.hslda.org/research/ray2003/default.asp (January 16, 2007).

measure, the results support the idea that homeschooling likely leads to similar or positive life outcomes compared to the general population.

Family Characteristics As a Factor. One likely cause of the general success of homeschoolers is positive family backgrounds. Academic researchers have concluded that family background characteristics are a primary factor in shaping students' academic achievement.¹⁷ Homeschooling families are more likely to have at least one parent who earned a college degree compared to the general population. Homeschooled students are also more likely to live in two-parent households. These family background characteristics are an important factor in the general positive outcomes of homeschooled students.

The Fiscal Impact of Homeschooling

The growing number of students being educated at home affects the public education system in a number of ways. Homeschooling saves taxpayers resources that would otherwise have been spent educating homeschooled children if they had enrolled in public school.

Public education is financed through complex funding formulas and revenue streams that come from federal, state, and local taxpayers.¹⁸ When a child does not enroll in a public school, resources that otherwise would have been devoted to that child can be saved or reallocated to other uses. Determining the extent of savings from each homeschooled child is difficult. Generally, states fund schools through a formula system on a per student basis, but the federal government and local government bodies do not provide funding on a per student basis.

A reasonable estimate of the savings from each homeschooled student would be the national aver-

age per pupil expenditure on instruction, which was \$4,934 for the 2002–2003 school year according to National Center for Education Statistics estimates.¹⁹ This estimate of the average variable cost of educating an additional student excludes many of the general overhead costs that may remain when a child chooses not to attend public school.

Given the Department of Education's conservative estimate of 898,000 students²⁰ who were educated entirely at home in 2003, the National Home Education Research Institute's estimate of 2 million homeschool students, and the national average per pupil expenditure on instruction, homeschooling likely saves American taxpayers and public schools at least \$4.4 billion to \$9.9 billion in instruction costs each year.

Moreover, this is a conservative estimate. Homeschoolers may save taxpayers significantly more than that because of additional savings from overhead. If 2 million students chose to enroll in American public schools tomorrow, states and communities would need to allocate significant funding for construction of new school facilities to accommodate all of them.

Reasons for Likely Continued Growth

Several factors suggest that the number of students being homeschooled will continue to grow.

Homeschooling Innovations and Networks. The continued growth of the number of homeschooling families has led to a proliferation of resources and networks that facilitate homeschooling. Twenty-five years ago, a family that wanted to homeschool would likely have had limited curriculum and instructional options. Today, the options are nearly boundless. A Google search on "homeschooling" produces more than 13 million hits.²¹

17. For example, see Caroline Hoxby, "If Families Matter Most, Where Do Schools Come in?" Chap. 5 in Terry M. Moe, ed., *A Primer on American Schools* (Stanford, Calif.: Hoover Press, 2001), at www.hoover.org/publications/books/3009196.html (March 28, 2008).

18. For a discussion of the fiscal savings from students transferring out of public schools, see Susan L. Aud, "School Choice by the Numbers: The Fiscal Effect of School Choice Programs, 1990–2006," Milton and Rose D. Friedman Foundation, April 2007, at www.friedmanfoundation.org/friedman/downloadFile.do?id=243 (March 28, 2008).

19. National Center for Education Statistics, *The Digest of Education Statistics 2006*, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, Table 169, at www.nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d06/tables/dt06_169.asp (February 14, 2008).

20. National Center for Education Statistics, "Homeschooling in the United States," p. 3, Table 1.

This demonstrates the wide range of instruction options and homeschooling networks that parents can access when they choose to homeschool their children.

Parents can find and purchase curriculum materials through online exchanges and other networks.²² Hundreds of Web sites, blogs, and books are devoted to supporting parents who homeschool. In some cases, parents can access free or low-cost instructional products to teach their children. Other options include online learning services such as K12.com, which offers professionally developed courses online for relatively low monthly fees.²³ Across the United States, a growing number of for-profit tutoring providers are in operation, such as Kumon and Sylvan Learning Centers, which offer parents opportunities to provide supplementary instruction to their children.

Parents can also join a growing number of homeschooling networks across the United States and around the world. Most states have some form of support network for homeschooling.²⁴ These networks facilitate collaborative instruction and provide opportunities for socialization for homeschooled students. For example, students can participate in speech and debate tournaments tailored to homeschooled students through the National Christian Forensics and Communications Association.²⁵ Homeschoolers can also participate in various athletic networks.²⁶ In

addition, homeschoolers are eligible under NCAA eligibility rules to participate in college athletics.²⁷

Public Education Partnerships. Across the country, many states have policies that facilitate home instruction by allowing homeschoolers to participate in some public school activities. At least 20 states have policies established by statute or legal ruling that allow homeschooled students to participate in some public school activities, such as extracurricular activities and athletics.²⁸

Many public schools offer homeschooled students the opportunity to attend part-time. The Education Commission of the States reports that individual schools are often allowed to determine whether or not to allow homeschooled students to participate part-time, noting that allowing students to attend can lead to additional funding and requirements that homeschooled students participate in state-mandated testing.²⁹

In addition, a growing number of states now offer some form of distance and online learning opportunities. According to the Department of Education, 36 percent of public school districts in 2002–2003 had students enrolled in distance education courses. In all, 9 percent of public schools nationwide offered distance education courses. Schools in rural communities were more likely to offer distance education: 15 percent as of 2002–2003.³⁰

21. As of March 31, 2008.

22. For example, see Home School Legal Defense Association, “Curriculum Market,” Web site, at <http://market.hsllda.org/auction/xcAuction.asp> (January 23, 2008).

23. For more information, visit K12, Web site, at www.K12.com (March 28, 2008).

24. For example, see a listing of “State Home School Support Organizations,” in Learning for Life, “Home School and Private School Organizations,” updated March 9, 2008, at www.learning4liferesources.com/homeschool_page2.html (March 28, 2008).

25. National Christian Forensics and Communications Association, Web site, at www.ncfca.org (April 1, 2008).

26. A to Z Home’s Cool, “Sports Programs,” at <http://homeschooling.gomilpitas.com/explore/sportsprograms.htm> (January 23, 2008).

27. Home School Legal Defense Association, “NCAA: College Sports,” at www.hsllda.org/docs/nche/Issues/N/NCAA.asp (January 23, 2008).

28. Home School Legal Defense Association, “State Laws Concerning Participation of Homeschool Students in Public School Activities,” September 11, 2006, at www.hsllda.org/docs/nche/000000/00000048.asp (January 17, 2008).

29. Education Commission of the States, “Homeschooling,” at www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=72 (January 17, 2008).

30. National Center for Education Statistics, “Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary and Secondary School Students: 2002–03,” NCES–2005–010, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, March 2005, at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2005/2005010.pdf> (October 25, 2007).

The proliferation of distance learning options could allow more students to participate in some form of learning from home.

Education Tax Credits. Some states also offer education tax credits or deductions for qualifying education-related expenses. Education tax credits and deductions reduce a taxpayer's tax liability or the amount of income that is subject to tax. For example, Iowa, Illinois, and Minnesota offer various tax credits and deductions for education-related expenses, including private school tuition and payments for instructional materials.³¹ As education tax credits proliferate across the country, homeschooling could become a more affordable option for many Americans.

Other Societal Trends. Other technological and societal trends could also contribute to continued growth in homeschooling. In the future, more families may be able to find creative ways to balance work and home responsibilities, potentially increasing the likelihood that they can homeschool their children.

One promising trend is telecommuting. A growing number of American workers are taking advantage of opportunities to work from home. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 4.5 million Americans worked from home in 2003. Between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of workers who worked from home increased by 23 percent—twice the growth rate of the overall workforce.³² As more Americans take advantage of flexible working opportunities, including telecommuting, homeschooling may become a more practical option for their families.

Homeschooling and Systemic Education Reform

Homeschooling is an important component of the student-centered educational reforms that are

changing the landscape of American education. In 2008, millions of American families benefit from greater opportunities to control how their children are educated through student-centered reforms. For example, more than 150,000 children are attending private schools using publicly funded scholarships through private school choice programs. Moreover, an estimated 1.2 million students attend charter schools instead of traditional public schools.³³

The growing number of students taking advantage of school choice options has created competition for the traditional public school system. The threat of losing students to charter schools or private school choice programs pressures public schools to reform to attract more students. Harvard University economist Caroline Hoxby evaluated the competitive effects of school choice programs in Arizona, Milwaukee, and Michigan and found that competition has caused public schools to improve performance.³⁴

Whether the growing trend toward homeschooling is creating similar competition for the traditional public school system is an interesting question for further academic research. The estimated 1 million to 2 million homeschoolers is similar to the estimated 1 million or more children attending charter schools or participating in school voucher programs. This suggests that trends toward homeschooling could be having a competitive effect on the public school system. If the trend toward increased homeschooling continues, academic researchers may have an opportunity to evaluate how homeschooling is affecting the traditional public school system.

What Federal and State Policymakers Should Do

While scientific research is limited, the available evidence suggests that homeschooling provides a positive learning environment for the estimated 1.1

31. Home School Legal Defense Association, "Education Tax Credits," April 15, 2005, at <http://nche.hslda.org/docs/nche/000010/200504150.asp> (January 31, 2008).

32. U.S. Census Bureau, "Census Bureau Releases Information on Home Workers," October 20, 2004, at www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/census_2000/002966.html (March 28, 2008).

33. Dan Lips, "School Choice: Policy Developments and National Participation Estimates in 2007–2008," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2102, January 31, 2008, at www.heritage.org/Research/Education/bg2102.cfm.

34. Caroline Minter Hoxby, "Rising Tide," *Education Next*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Spring 2001), at www.educationnext.org/20014/68.html (November 2, 2007).

million American children who are being educated at home. Homeschooling families are making a valuable contribution to American education without relying on taxpayer assistance, saving taxpayers as much as \$4.4 billion to \$9.9 billion annually by forgoing taxpayer-funded public education. Many families make significant financial sacrifices to homeschool their children after paying federal, state, and local taxes that support public education.

Policymakers should take steps to protect all parents' right to teach their children at home and implement reforms to facilitate homeschooling.

Specifically, Members of Congress should:

- **Avoid establishing regulations that would restrict or hinder families' right to homeschool** in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education.
- **Reform the Coverdell education savings account program to include homeschooling costs under allowable uses for tax-free education expenditures.** Under current law, homeschooling costs are allowed under regulations for Coverdell education savings accounts only in states that define homeschooling as private schooling.

State policymakers should:

- **Avoid establishing regulations to restrict homeschooling.**
- **Implement reforms to provide equal access to public school extracurricular activities.**

- **Offer homeschoolers some tax relief** through education tax credits or deductions for specific homeschooling costs.
- **Offer state tax incentives for contributions made to children's Coverdell education savings accounts** to enable more families to save for their children's education expenses, including homeschooling.

Conclusion

A growing number of American families are choosing to homeschool their children. The Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reports that approximately 1.1 million children were being educated at home as of 2003. Other estimates place the number of homeschooled students at more than 2 million. Homeschooling families save American taxpayers at least \$4.4 billion to \$9.9 billion annually by forgoing taxpayer-funded public education. While research evidence is limited, evaluations of student outcomes suggest that homeschooling is a successful educational method for participating students.

Federal and state policymakers should protect all families' right to educate their children at home and implement policies to enable more families to homeschool their children in the future.

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