

US Public Education Policy: Missing Voices

By Corin Barsily Goodwin, Martha Shaindlin, Emily Villamar, Madeline Goodwin

GHF: Gifted Homeschoolers Forum

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Once upon a time in a previous version of America, the public school system was the purview of society at large while alternative options barely hit the radar.¹ Children who did not fit well in the public school system had to adjust to fit or suffer the results of falling through the cracks, often dropping out and ending their education entirely.² **We no longer live in that version of America.** Some families can choose to leave the public school system in favor of alternatives, and often feel forced to do so because the schools they pay their hard-earned tax dollars to support seem unable or unwilling to understand, much less support, the needs of their children. Meanwhile, neuroscience has taken off and the understanding of *giftedness* and *twice exceptionality* (gifted plus another diagnosis) are growing fields of study.³ Unfortunately, few school districts and policymakers have kept up with the research or the application of the research. Many families have resorted to voting with their feet by leaving the schools entirely, or—increasingly—patching together a variety of resources (including public school districts) to create a tailored education solution for the child.

In recent years, GHF: Gifted Homeschoolers Forum has witnessed a significant shift in the demographic composition of homeschoolers in general and in our community in particular. Education is no longer limited to a binary choice between traditional public/private schools or homeschool; instead, many families now take advantage of the variety of education options available, resulting in the possibility of a more tailored path for their children.⁴ Some families choose to send their children exclusively to school or to homeschool in a traditional model. Far more have multiple children in different educational settings, or may have one child who spends time in and out of a variety of educational settings over the years, based on the their family's circumstances, their needs, and their available choices. **Depicting all homeschoolers as anti-school would be an unfortunate mischaracterization.**

Some homeschooling families do make ideological choices about how to educate their children, but far more leave their neighborhood public schools, originally chosen by default, because the public school system does not or cannot meet the needs of their children. Some would like to eventually return to the public schools, while others discover that homeschooling is the best thing that ever happened to their family. **The homeschool community is an incredibly diverse group of people in a multitude of circumstances. Their thoughts on improving the public school system can provide valuable input for policy makers.**

In the United States, over 90 percent of children are enrolled in public schools.⁵ However, while the number who identify as homeschoolers has grown rapidly over the past two decades,⁶ educational policy remains focused on classroom standards and other traditional school concerns. Homeschoolers are seen as ideologues with nothing to add to the discussion on how to improve public education because it is assumed that they were never planning on attending. **The lack of feedback from this much more diverse and variable group—many of whom did try public school but found it could not meet the needs of their children at a given time and place—limits the public school policymakers’ input from what could be viewed as disenchanting customers.** Many homeschoolers find themselves disengaged from the process of improving the very services many would like to access. Even those homeschoolers who never attend public school are affected as community members by the outcomes of public school policy-making decisions.

At present, very few homeschoolers have the opportunity to speak to the highest level of policymakers in national government. Those who currently have an opportunity to be heard tend to be from organizations representing niche homeschooling demographics, almost exclusively with an ideological or primarily religious perspective.⁷ These groups do not provide an accurate representation of the wide range and diversity of today’s homeschoolers nor of their reasons for choosing to opt out of public schools. **A better approach would be to seek input from the many former public school families who have opted out due to educational need rather than ideological or religious choice.**

Consider the following: If you were an auto manufacturer and you wanted to grow your sales numbers, you would not exclusively focus your resources on garnering input from dyed-in-the-wool aficionados of another brand. You might not worry too much about the consumers who are already satisfied owners of your product, either. Rather, you would go to the folks who tried your cars, but decided to buy elsewhere. After all, they were interested enough at one point to purchase or consider purchasing your product, so it would be helpful to understand why they opted out of buying from you this time. That feedback would help you better understand how to make the adjustments to improve your sales figures without scaring off the loyal customers. **Similarly, if you want to make the public school system better for everyone, you need to ask the former public school families why they left, and what, if anything, would bring them back.**

With this in mind, GHF did an initial survey of the families in our community, focusing on parents of gifted and twice-exceptional children who currently homeschool, have previously homeschooled, or are considering homeschooling in the future. The goal was to learn more about the current makeup of this demographic and the reasons for their educational choices. While our global community consists of millions of families around the world, we focused on the hundreds

of thousands of families we represent specifically in the United States. We requested that participants be parents who could discuss their own children (many members of our community are educators or professionals in related fields). The data yielded preliminary results which may alter common misconceptions of this population. This information can be useful for educators, lawmakers, and researchers in trying to understand gifted/2e families, homeschoolers, and how they relate to the public education system.

Demographics

Almost 500 people responded, of whom 100 percent indicated they were parents. Of these, 13 percent also identified as teaching professionals, and 4 percent as “other professionals working with children.” We did not ask people to state their age range, household income, ethnicity, or other specific demographic information, but are considering this for future surveys.

Fifteen states had ten or more respondents, accounting for 293 of the total. An additional 42 respondents indicated they currently lived outside the US, with 20 coming from Canada, eight from Australia, and two from Sweden. We did not ask specifically if these were expatriate families, although anecdotal evidence suggests this is the case.

Families averaged two children per family for a total of 879 children, with 82 percent of those children being under the age of 18 at the time of the survey. For all children, regardless of age, 75 percent have been identified formally or informally as gifted and 31 percent as twice-exceptional (2e). We asked about specific additional diagnoses and learned that 28 percent have processing disorders and 42 percent have challenges such as autism spectrum disorders, food allergies and sensitivities, dyslexia, and sensory processing issues. (Twice exceptionality is when learning disorders and other challenges co-exist with giftedness; thus respondents were able to select more than one answer.)

they were planning to attend community college, 26 percent planned to utilize the K12 public schools, and 19 percent were considering private schools. In other words, **even if these families are currently homeschooling, many have not discounted entering or re-entering the public school system in the future.**

In order to better understand why families turn to alternative education, we asked respondents to rank in order of importance their reasons for opting out of the public schools. “No gifted services” and “more family time” were neck-and-neck as the most important reasons. Following close behind were “no 2e support” and “bullying.” We realized that the “no gifted services” and “no 2e support” needed to be better distinguished from one another, and hope to revisit that question in a future survey. It was particularly interesting that the response regarding “more family time” increased for each additional child within a family, at least until child five and six, at which point the data ticked in the other direction (which we attribute to the small sample size for families of this size). It seems likely that once a family begins to homeschool one child, they simply find it easier to make that choice for those who follow, either for family dynamics or for logistical purposes. It is also notable that if one child is gifted or 2e, the biological siblings are statistically more likely to be so as well, which would also likely be an important factor.

For reasons to homeschool, “Other” came in next, but since we did not collect open responses for this, we cannot presume what this indicates. We hope that a follow-up survey will address this issue. “Health/medical” and “other safety issues” followed. “Prefer to avoid government schools” was the second to last response chosen, with “religious reasons” in last place, contrary to the stereotype many people have about homeschoolers.

Over half of respondents have accessed special services for their children, whether through public schools or privately. For individual children within families, those special services include occupational therapy (40 percent), technological tools (21 percent), and one-on-one tutoring (23 percent). Forty-two percent of respondents chose “Other” for this question, with speech therapy and vision therapy appearing most in the comments. **Notable for policy makers is that 34 percent of families who accessed special services—or almost 20 percent of survey respondents—had these services paid for or provided for, either in whole or in part, by their public school district.**

Conclusion

The work to obtain a more detailed picture of families who choose to homeschool continues, as does our ongoing effort to better understand why families of gifted or twice-exceptional children would make this choice. In further research, we could delve further into how families and school districts define *gifted* and *twice-exceptional* and what services are offered in each area. Parsing out the impact of children’s and parents’ ages could be interesting, as well as understanding

when or if particular societal changes (perhaps the increase in standardized testing, or the proliferation of low cost online resources) made homeschooling a more mainstream choice, thereby lowering the barriers to entry. Of course the whole concept of defining “homeschooling” is fraught with problems, as distinctions among *homeschool*, *unschool*, *charter school*, and other forms of outside-the-box education are far from universally agreed upon.

For our immediate purposes, however, perhaps the most significant result of this research is the documentation of a melding of educational options. Families surveyed by GHF are not making choices based on ideology so much as they are seeking the best fit for each child, based on the needs of that child and of the family at any given place and time. Some may be happy—or happy enough—in the public school system. Others try homeschooling as a last choice (while for others, homeschooling simply is not possible in their situation). Many more take advantage of a combination of these options along with online classes, independent programs, micro-schools, co-ops, and much more. The bottom line is that there is a critical need for a variety of *viable* educational options for all children. **Families of all kinds deserve a seat at the education policy-making table, and families who homeschool should not be permanently marginalized—left unheard—because they have chosen to do what they believe is best for the academic and developmental needs of their children. These families have important information to share and we are all better off for taking the time to hear it.**

Footnotes

1. Murphy, Joseph. *Homeschooling in America: Capturing and Assessing the Movement*. Newbury Park, CA: Corwin, 2012.
2. IES>NCES: National Center for Education Statistics. “Fast Facts: Dropout Rates.” Accessed May 21, 2017. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>.
3. GHF: *Gifted Homeschoolers Forum*. “Articles.” Accessed May 21, 2017. giftedhomeschoolers.org/resources/parent-and-professional-resources/articles/.
4. Goodwin, Corin, and Mika Gustavson. *Making the Choice: When Typical School Doesn't Fit Your Atypical Child*. Olympia, WA: GHF Press, 2011.
5. IES>NCES: National Center for Education Statistics. “Public School Enrollment.” Last modified May 2016. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cga.asp.
6. Murphy, Joseph. *Homeschooling in America: Capturing and Assessing the Movement*. Newbury, CA: Corwin, 2012.
7. Gaffney, Brendan. "The Homeschooling Lobby and the Dangers of Deregulation." *Brown Political Review*, April 14, 2016. Accessed May 21, 2017. www.brownpoliticalreview.org/2016/04/homeschooling-lobby-dangers-deregulation/.