

Solid Evidence to Support Home-Schooling

Best of all, home-schoolers transcend social factors.

By Michael P. Farris

(Reprinted with permission of The Wall Street Journal, © March 5, 1997, Dow Jones and Co., Inc. All rights reserved)

Secretary of Education Richard Riley has announced that this spring he will host a national forum to bring “the nation’s best teachers” together to address our country’s education challenges. If he is willing to break through institutional prejudice, Mr. Riley will include a number of home-schooling parents in his forum. A new study by the National Home Education Research Institute again shows that home education is far more successful than public education.

Home-school students score significantly higher on standardized achievement tests than their public school counterparts do. While by definition public school students average at the 50th percentile on standardized tests, this nation-wide study reveals that home-schoolers have average scores between the 80th and 87th percentiles on every sub-test (including reading, listening, language, math, science, social studies and study skills). The average score on the basic battery of skills is in the 85th percentile, while the average complete battery score is in the 87th percentile — a phenomenal 37-percentile differential.

And no one should think that home-schooling is limited to a few former hippies and fundamentalist Christians. There are 1.2 million school-age children home-schooled in America. This is more students than are enrolled in New Jersey, the state with the 10th-largest public school enrollment. There are also more home-schoolers nationally than there are public school students in Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Rhode Island, Vermont and Wyoming combined.

Public school defenders will undoubtedly chafe at our test scores, arguing that public schools have more minority students than home-schools do. But the study quickly dispels the myth that minorities cannot achieve as well as whites. Ethnic minorities make up 5% of home-school students, and home-schooled minorities and whites both score on average in the 87th percentile on reading tests. In public schools, however, whites significantly outpace minorities in reading scores (whites: 47th percentile; blacks: 28th percentile; Hispanics: 28th percentile). In public schools, the disparity in math scores is huge: 58th percentile for whites; 24th percentile for blacks; and 29th percentile for Hispanics.

Public school officials have some explaining to do. Why is it that despite their constant lip service to the goal of equal opportunity, public schools continue to deliver abysmally low academic quality to minority students? Home-schoolers have broken out of the ugly, demeaning stereotype of racial under-achievement. Why can’t government schools do the same?

Whatever the reasons for the dilemma of public education failure, they don’t include inadequate funding. For each home-school child, the average schooling cost is \$546 per year; the annual public school per-pupil expenditure is \$5,325. Both figures exclude the capital costs of the building in which each child is taught.

“But what about socialization?” you ask. There is no need to fear that home-schoolers are isolated at home all day. Home-school children are involved in an average of 5.2 outside activities — including Scouts, ballet, church activities, sports and 4-H clubs — each week; 98% are involved in two or more outside functions on a weekly basis.

The No. 1 political goal of home-schoolers is quite modest. We just

want to be left alone. Those who believe that government regulation is essential for success would do well to look at the cold, hard numbers that prove otherwise. There is no significant statistical difference in student test scores between those taught by a parent who is or has been a certified teacher and those whose parents were never certified. And there is no significant statistical difference in student test scores between those taught by parents with a college degree and students taught by those who have never attended college. In fact, students taught by parents who have not finished high school score 30 percentiles higher than students in the public schools. Students from states that highly regulate home-schooling score exactly the same as students from states with little or no regulation.

The success of the modern home-schooling movement can be explained with a couple of old-fashioned concepts. Hard work and parental involvement lead to the best individual academic achievement. But there is perhaps an even more fundamental reason. Home-schooling, by its nature, focuses on the individual child. Public school reformers are constantly scheming with new ideas for “all children.” Such programs, like the federal government’s Goals 2000, invariably lead to one-size-fits-all mediocrity. Programs that allow each child to maximize his or her own individual abilities lead to success.

There is no reason that public schools cannot also adopt the “each child” theory that underlies home education. No reason, that is, except the politically difficult obstacles that the centralized bureaucrats pose to parents and teachers. If Mr. Riley is serious about learning from educational success, he’ll find that the home is a pretty good place to start looking.

(Mr. Farris is president of the Home-School Legal Defense Association.)