

Undoing the “Us vs. Them” of Public and Home Schooling

Michael H. Romanowski
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ONCE considered an anomaly in American education, home schooling has become an increasingly popular alternative to both public and private schools in today's culture, an estimated 1,200,000 to 1,700,000 U.S. K-12 students currently being home-schooled. This spectacular growth not only testifies to parental demand for less institutionalized options for their children's education, but has also established home schooling as a significant and legitimate force in the American educational landscape.

One of the more fascinating aspects of the home-school movement is its appeal to a demographic diversity that includes virtually all races,

Michael H. Romanowski (m-romanowski@onu.edu) is Associate Professor of Education, Ohio Northern University, Ada, OH 45810. Condensed from Streamlined Seminar, 19 (Spring 2001), 1-4. Published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314 (phone: 703-684-3345).

religions, socioeconomic groups, and political viewpoints. There are conservatives who consider public education too liberal, liberals who consider it too conservative, and those who are driven by religious convictions.

Despite its growth, however, home schooling is not without problems and difficulties. In particular, its relationship with public schools is often tense, due partly to lack of understanding by public school educators of why parents choose to home-school their children. This results in the “us versus them” mentality that often governs relationships between professional educators and home-school parents. Both need to rethink their roles and build partnerships that will benefit children wherever they are taught.

Although parents choose to home-school their children for many reasons, they might be categorized as ideologues and pedagogues. Ideologues have specific beliefs, values, and skills they want their children to learn and embrace. Convinced these things are not being adequately taught in public school, they opt for home schooling.

Motivation Based on Religion

The ideologues’ motivation is essentially religion-based, believing public schools have a secular humanist philosophy without strong Christian values. They have a strong concern for their children’s moral, ethical, and spiritual development, and feel public schools fail to take religion seriously. For these parents, religious beliefs and the education of their children are inextricably intertwined.

Pedagogues prefer to teach their children at home primarily because they feel it will benefit their children’s education. They are less concerned with public education content than with their conviction that whatever public schools teach, they don’t teach well. Often, these parents have turned to home schooling after having experienced or observed children suffering emotionally and/or academically in public schools.

Pedagogues also feel schools are often unwilling or unable to serve children with unique learning styles or scholarly needs. They challenge the power of public schools to sort, select, and label their children based on what they see as a limited measure of their ability. This leads them to believe that breaking from the traditional formal teaching model will lead to improved understanding and learning in their children.

The most common—and most damaging—conflict between public school educators and parents who opt to home-school is the “us versus them” attitude grounded in their limited and often negative experiences with each other. Home-school parents are stereotyped as loners who do not care about the opinions of others, as people who are withdrawn from

society and want to shelter their children from the “evil” of public schools. They are often viewed as arrogant because they express their view that public schools aren’t good enough for their children.

Many public school teachers and principals view home schooling as a serious threat and take offense at what they regard as personal attacks on their profession and abilities. They see home educators as professionally and academically inferior and accuse home schooling of lacking in social development, classroom-provided stimulation of ideas, and academic and social competition.

The Students Lose in Both Settings

Although there may be some truth in these stereotypes, the “us versus them” mentality creates an atmosphere of distrust that can produce negative results. First, these opposing perspectives inhibit any formal cooperation between home and public schools. Second, the tension and uneasiness between home schoolers and public educators discourages any formal or informal dialogues, discussions, or sharing of ideas between them. In the long run, students lose, because shared information might improve learning and academic success in both educational settings.

For this to change, public school educators and home-schooling parents must review and rethink their views of education and their roles in the education process. How can they overcome the “us versus them” barrier?

How home-schoolers can change. First, home-school parents must begin to move from negative views of public schools and start to perceive the important, essential role of U.S. public education. They must develop an understanding of the responsibilities public schools bear and view themselves not as self-contained entities, but as part of a larger educational system deserving their support. This support can range from monetary donations to volunteering. It is key for home-school parents to get involved with their public schools because home educators who feel connected to their schools support them more fully. This understanding and support are also needed because all citizens benefit from public education.

How public-school educators can change. Principals and teachers must also begin to transform negative views of home schooling and parents who choose it, recognizing that parents have the primary responsibility for educating their children, and that parents, the school, and the community must work together to maximize every child’s potential. Rather than questioning motives and

feeling threatened when families home-school, public-school educators should aid those families wherever possible. The public school's responsibility is not only to students in the schoolhouse, but to all students in the community.

By working with rather than against home-schoolers, public schools can benefit from new approaches to parent involvement, individualized instruction, use of technology in learning, one-on-one tutoring, distance learning, and child-initiated learning. Other possible areas might involve the effects of different learning environments on student achievement and the impact of varied curricula on student learning.

Evidence shows most home schoolers do very well on achievement tests, often outperforming their public school peers. Since proficiency testing often drives public education, public schools should be particularly interested in why home-schooled children perform well on these tests, and how this knowledge could be used by public-school teachers to help students improve their scores. But for home schooling to make these contributions to public education, there must be a climate of mutual understanding and respect.

Building a working relationship. Instead of viewing themselves as competitors, the public school and home school should be seen as complementing each other. Both have their place and purpose in the educational process of a free society. More important, mutual recognition and respect can be the basis for developing a productive relationship.

Despite a more favorable legal climate for home schooling now than in earlier years, allowing home-school families to remain completely removed from public education, many such families want to build positive working relationships with their public schools. A recent study in Virginia revealed that most home-schooling parents want such relationships with local public schools, and that they would welcome assistance in the form of classes, inservices, use of school facilities and materials, and curriculum information

Here are some ways to begin building a home school-public school relationship:

Exchange ideas. This is especially important to home schoolers, many of whom depend on a homeschool network for ideas and support. Both public-school teachers and home-school parents could benefit from a formal system enabling them to engage in pedagogical dialogue. This dialogue could take forms ranging from e-mailing specific questions and answers on particular issues to sharing inservice training, curriculum information, and school facilities with home-school

parents. I know of one public school teacher who even offered to conduct a special parents' night for homeschool parents to discuss issues relevant to their children's education.

Offer dual enrollment, where home-schooled students are able to enroll in their school district for academic or instructional programs, participate in any district-offered extracurricular activity, and use the services of the appropriate area education agency. In practice, home-schooled students usually attend public-school "specials," such as art, music, physical education, chorus, and band. Dual enrollment also allows them to participate in sports, have access to district textbooks and resources, participate in standardized testing, and take enrichment classes.

While it seems obvious that home schooling would benefit most from this arrangement, public schools also benefit in terms of community and financial support. For example, school districts in Iowa can receive state aid for home-schooled children who choose to be part of their school community. Perhaps even more important are the intangible benefits that may accrue as home educators develop a connection with their schools and begin to more fully appreciate and support them.

Provide a home-school liaison. Ideally, public schools could designate a coordinator to work with home-school families who desire a connection to public education. At the minimum, this individual could help home-school parents understand and conform to state education requirements. But the liaison could also help develop appropriate programs and guidelines meeting the needs of both public and home schools.

The liaison role must not be perceived as an attempt to control home schooling. This can be avoided if the liaison is selected by a group that includes both public school educators and home-schoolers. Because the consensus among home-schoolers is that each family should make its own decisions about education, religion, and lifestyle, a liaison's sole purpose should be to help define and satisfy the educational needs of each home-schooled child.

Because the great majority of parents have neither the desire nor resources for home schooling, it should not be viewed as a threat to public education. Public educators should join home-schoolers in mutually beneficial relationships that improve chances for the academic success of both public school and home-school children. When public schools work closely with home-school families, they demonstrate that their goal is to help every child reach his or her educational goals. This is the essence of a truly democratic educational system. *e*