

Editorial

Support for home-schoolers can pay off for all students

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Today's debate: Teaching at home

Our view: Involved home-school students benefit public school community.

As 47 million children return to public schools, some 2 million are staying home to get their instruction. In nearly every state, the number of children being educated in their homes is rising about 10% a year.

The growth reflects a vast broadening in the types of families that embrace home schooling. The stereotype of home-schoolers as religious separatists or the offspring of New Age seekers has not been true for years. Now, though, local home-schooling organizations report that about 10% of their families are black or Hispanic.

The growing diversity among families that teach their children themselves is linked to the spreading popularity of the school choice movement. Parents like having the power to choose the educational setting that best serves their children's needs.

Yet instead of accepting -- even welcoming -- the valuable role home-school supporters can play in increasing choices, too many traditional educators are setting up roadblocks. Some states impose excessive paperwork demands on home-schooling parents, even when their children appear to be flourishing academically. Many school districts deny home-schooled children the opportunity to participate in music and sports activities at local schools.

Such moves can needlessly deprive public schools of valuable alliances with taxpayers and advocates of quality education.

Several proven ways can help more states and school districts reach out to home-schooling parents. Among them:

- * Funding online teaching. The Florida Virtual School is a public school that conducts classes over the Internet. Students include not only home-schoolers but also students looking for courses their local schools don't offer or more flexible class schedules.

- * Reducing burdensome paperwork. Maine did so in May as one of several states that acceded to home-schooling parents' requests to be treated more like families in private schools. In recent years, Oregon, Arkansas and Arizona have loosened onerous rules aimed at home-schoolers.

- * Letting home-schoolers join school activities. In July, the Pennsylvania House of Representatives passed a bill requiring the state's 501 school districts to open sports teams and other extracurricular activities to home-schoolers. The measure, which goes to the state

senate this fall, reflects a national trend granting home-schooled students use of some public-school services.

Those critical of home schooling argue that parents often fall short as competent teachers. To date, though, no evidence demonstrates a significant problem of home-schooled children receiving poor educations. In fact, research suggests home schooling can be very effective.

Families choosing home schooling provide the close parental involvement that students need to succeed academically. Supporting that choice benefits children, their parents and local school districts.

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