
Akron Beacon Journal

**Claims of Academic Success Rely on Anecdotes,
Flawed Data Analysis**

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Dennis J. Willard and Doug Oplinger

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Lack of proof

Home-schooled children have won the National Spelling Bee twice and National Geography Bee three times in the last eight years.

Home-schooling parents point to college entrance-exam results as proof their children score higher than the general population.

Many home-schooled students are National Merit Scholars.

With victories such as those under their belts, plus an armload of data-driven studies, home-schooling parents argue that their children not only are succeeding academically, but also are doing far better than those in the public schools.

“Home schoolers have demonstrated significant academic achievement, and the Home School Legal Defense Association is unaware of any serious critics who still argue that home schoolers struggle academically,” Michael Smith, president of the politically powerful HSLDA, wrote in a recent article.

Asked about the statement, Smith told the Akron Beacon Journal that anyone who suggests otherwise is “biased.”

Indeed, there are many among the approximately 1.1 million home-schooled children who are receiving an above-average education.

However, if Americans accept the idea that home schooling is putting public schools to shame with an extraordinary crop of bright students, it's mainly because home schoolers successfully have marketed good anecdotes and bad analyses of the few national studies.

Despite Smith's assertion, there are serious critics.

- Studies routinely cited as evidence that home-schooled students perform better than public school students don't prove anything because there are huge, untested segments of the home-school population that may be failing, according to many researchers.
- Representatives of the SAT and ACT college testing services said their annual reports are being misused and don't prove that home schoolers are smarter.
- Some state universities, Ivy League colleges and military academies said that home schoolers have been underrepresented among their incoming freshmen.
- Only a few states collect information about home schoolers. In Arkansas, where the state has aggregate standardized test scores for home schoolers, results show a downward trend for at least six years and, at best, academic mediocrity.
- There is concern among school officials and some researchers that the number of home-school failures is growing at a rate and a social cost that are unknown -- and no one is paying attention.

When the cost is calculated, "it will be ugly," said Dennis Rose, superintendent of Galion schools in central Ohio.

Little accountability

At the same time the nation is collecting an unprecedented volume of statistics on public school students, their teachers and school buildings, it asks for almost nothing and knows almost nothing about children who are educated at home.

Home-schooling parents say that because they accept no tax dollars, they should be free of oversight.

Advocates validate their academic success with standardized test scores from a select group of home-schooled children, but they also argue against mandatory testing of all home schoolers because they believe the methodology is flawed and ignores their children's individuality. They decry the curricula imposed upon teachers to prepare children to pass the tests as a key reason for their opting to home-school.

"Is it fair that the state decides how you bring your child up? No, I don't think it is a good question," a home-schooling mother said in a Beacon Journal focus group that granted all its participants anonymity. "I think that infringes on our basic rights as Americans."

With few exceptions, most levels of government don't ask questions of the home-school population.

The administration of President George W. Bush and Congress exempted home schoolers from the No Child Left Behind Act.

The No Child Left Behind law requires extensive testing in all public schools, while only 11 states, according to the Home School Legal Defense Association, have mandatory home-school testing. Most of those states don't require the parents to show the scores to school officials.

No Child Left Behind also imposes a costly requirement on schools to hire "highly qualified teachers," while many of the country's largest states have no requirements for parents wanting to home-school.

In Ohio, parents are given options as to how to show their children are succeeding. Most choose an "academic assessment" performed by a certified teacher and delivered to the local superintendent.

There is no requirement the assessing teacher talk to the child. Some of the assessors are immediate family members; some are not properly certified.

In one effort to show the assessments could be bogus, a Colorado man secured one through the mail for his dog.

The absence of accountability is a surprise to many who don't home-school.

"Why are there so many standards for us who take our kids to a public or private school, but there are not standards for these kids being home-schooled?" one parent asked in a focus group. "That logically doesn't make sense if the goal is to educate every child."

In 1999 -- the last time the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll asked questions about home-school accountability -- 92 percent of the respondents said home schoolers should take the same tests required of public school students.

A 1997 poll by the same organization showed that 88 percent believed that home schoolers should be required to meet a minimum level of quality education.

Instead, home schoolers have gained even more freedom as their claims of academic success largely have gone unchallenged.

Dubious conclusions

To deter calls for government oversight, home-schooling parents have presented colorful bar charts and studies to state lawmakers, sent information packets to the news media and posted reports on the Internet that suggest their children routinely outperform public school children.

However, the authors of the most prominent home-school research say that no study confirms that claim.

Lawrence M. Rudner published the pivotal study of home schooling in 1999. At the time, he was an independent education researcher at the University of Maryland.

As portrayed by home schoolers, the Rudner report suggested that children educated at home scored, on average, better than 70 percent to 80 percent of public school students and at least a grade level ahead.

Rudner's credentials gave his 1999 study special credibility. Even though HSLDA sponsored his work, he was identified as an "independent researcher" whose work was critiqued by peers.

To a nonresearcher looking at the report, the study was impressive because of its large sample of 20,000 children and its use of the well-known Iowa Tests of Basic Skills and the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency.

Today, however, Rudner said his work has been misrepresented. He said home schoolers are drawing incorrect conclusions, and newspaper reporters are quoting each other rather than reading what he wrote.

"The biggest annoyance was a large number of reporters that had read previous articles and never went to the original source and read the caveats," said Rudner, now chief psychometrician

for the Graduate Management Admission Council, where he is responsible for guaranteeing the reliability of college testing.

Rudner wrote multiple cautionary statements in his report and, in interviews at the time, urged reporters not to make blanket comparisons with all public school children.

"This was not a controlled experiment," and it "does not demonstrate that home schooling is superior to public or private schools, and the results must be interpreted with caution," he wrote in the first paragraph of his report.

Nonetheless, in the week following release of his study in March 1999, at least 20 stories in major U.S. newspapers referred in glowing terms to the success of home schoolers. "Study finds children schooled at home learn more," one headline read.

Some stories included Rudner's caveats; others did not.

The Daily Oklahoman, in an editorial, pointed out that Rudner's study was peer-reviewed -- meaning that other researchers examined and commented on his work. The editorial, however, didn't mention that the peer who wrote the official review was highly critical of the study.

Kariane Mari Welner, a researcher at the University of California at Los Angeles at the time, wrote that there were basic problems with the group that Rudner surveyed, resulting in "an erroneous picture of home schooling." She criticized the "universal conclusions trumpeted by the HSLDA" that were beyond the reach of the study.

HSLDA Chairman Michael Farris, who in 1999 was president of the organization, held a news conference at the time of the report's release to declare that the question of home-school academics had been proved to be a non-issue. He predicted the Rudner study would be used across the country as evidence that home schooling deserves less regulation, not more.

"We're doing well, and we've earned the right to have more and more freedom," Farris said in the *Virginian-Pilot*, a daily newspaper in Norfolk, Va. "People shouldn't be regulated where they don't need to be."

In dozens of states since then, the study has been used as evidence for relaxed home-school oversight or to fight off efforts to add regulations.

In the recent *Beacon Journal* interview, Rudner said his only conclusion was that if a home-schooling parent "is willing to put the time and energy and effort into it -- and you have to be a rare person who is willing to do this -- then in all likelihood you're going to have enormous success. I'll continue to say that."

He added: "I made the case in the paper that if you took the same kids and the same parents and put them in the public schools, these kids would probably do exceptionally well."

The main problem with the study, a number of critics said, is that participation was voluntary.

"Obviously, there is no point taking a test that you know you are going to fail," said Clive Belfield, a Columbia University education professor who also studies home schoolers.

Volunteers' results were compared with results from public schools, where all students must take the achievement tests, and where, under the No Child Left Behind Act, schools and teachers are judged by the results.

Nonetheless, home schoolers' interpretation of the Rudner study was accepted because no other study of its magnitude had been attempted. It changed the arguments about home schooling, Belfield said.

“He was the first mover on this. Before this, there was no story, basically. After Rudner, there is a story,” Belfield said.

Admission-test scores

The misuse of data and research also applies to college admissions.

Home schoolers generally score 8 percent to 9 percent higher on the SAT than public schoolers. Those scores are widely quoted in newspapers and in legislative hearings as proof of success.

However, representatives of both the SAT and ACT exams cautioned against drawing any conclusions from the numbers. They offered these reasons:

- Home schoolers appear to be underrepresented in the tests, raising questions about the number of home schoolers going to college.
- Some test takers who identify themselves as home-schooled say they have a ranking in their graduating class, which could indicate they were in a school rather than home-educated.
- Home schoolers who take the entrance tests are disproportionately white and from families with above-average income and education. This demographic group tends to score higher than the average anyway.

Belfield said it's inappropriate to compare ACT or SAT scores for a select group of home schoolers with those of all young people, just as it was in Rudner's study.

Belfield obtained the 2001 SAT results, adjusted them for socio-economic characteristics and found the score gap was cut in half.

One could conclude, Belfield said, that good home-schooling situations result in better academic performance. But, he said, the fact that so few test takers are home schoolers continues to raise questions about whether they are going to college.

Numbers in college

Still, the anecdotes about home schoolers getting into top colleges have created an image of success for the entire movement.

“I've learned that you don't really need a diploma to get into college,” a home-schooling mother said in a Beacon Journal focus group. “I've learned that the Ivy League schools actively go out and recruit home-school kids.”

A newspaper in Alberta, Canada, reported last year: “With elite schools such as Harvard and Yale actively recruiting the home-schooled, home schooling's academic credentials are no longer in question.”

Home schoolers are enrolling and succeeding in universities, but it's not known whether they are doing so in numbers comparable to the general population.

Dorie Baker, a spokeswoman for the dean of admissions for arts and humanities at Yale University, told the Beacon Journal that the dean was “surprised that anyone was asking” about home-schooled applicants because they are “so few and far between.”

Officials at the University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League school, told the New York Times in 1999 that 0.17 percent of their applicants were home schoolers, or about one-tenth the rate it should be to be proportionate with the estimated home-school population nationwide of about 2 percent. The Ohio Board of Regents, which handles data on all of Ohio's public universities and two-year colleges, a year ago found the same percentage as the University of Pennsylvania: 0.17 percent of incoming freshmen said they were home-schooled.

The U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y., said that in the last five years, about 0.4 percent of its applicants were home-schooled, and only 0.3 percent of those admitted were home-schooled.

In a survey by the Beacon Journal, a few small Ohio colleges -- notably Mount Vernon Nazarene and Findlay -- reported disproportionately large numbers of incoming freshmen who were home-schooled, but not enough to significantly affect Ohio's overall numbers.

Michael Smith, president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, said there are some reasons for what appear to be low college-enrollment numbers.

In many major states, among them California, home schools are legally defined as private schools, he said.

Many states require those schools to have names or identification numbers, so that when the home-schooled student takes a national standardized test or enrolls in a college, he or she may be inclined to check the box for private school rather than home school, Smith said.

“Some of the colleges may be fudging a bit,” too, he said. They're concerned that if they disclose admission of home-schooled young people who don't have high school diplomas, they may lose federal aid that targets high school graduates, he said.

And, Smith said, many home schoolers attend two-year colleges before they're 18 and move directly into four-year colleges without taking college admissions tests.

Last fall, the Home School Legal Defense Association released its own study that said home-school graduates nationwide attend college at a far higher rate than a similar age group in the general population.

To achieve HSLDA's claim, the home-school enrollment rate would need to be 10 times what the Ohio Board of Regents, the University of Pennsylvania and the SAT and ACT testing services say their data show.

As in the Rudner study, the home-schooled participants in the HSLDA's study were volunteers and were compared with the general population. Half were full-time college students at the time.

Failing students

Home-school failures aren't as readily apparent as the well-circulated stories of success.

In cases of educational neglect, most states prohibit public disclosure to protect the welfare of the children, and no one has compiled a comprehensive list of those cases that do become public.

But there are home-schooled children who are receiving an inadequate education.

David Swarbrick of Austin, Texas -- a father of public-schooled children -- has a rare perspective. The former pastor and public university instructor has transformed a home-school tutoring

business into a full-time occupation teaching about 225 children in two-hour math classes across central Texas.

He said many home schoolers have a "misconception that they're all brilliant." Those not in home schooling, he said, have a "misconception that home schoolers are hicks from the sticks."

Of all home schoolers, he estimates that "60 percent are on par with the public schools, 20 percent are above and 20 percent are below."

Some "are dropouts and can't read or write," he said.

Superintendents across the country expressed concern about children who are receiving an inadequate education.

When children don't show up for public school, the building attendance officer calls home to ask where they are. Court truancy officers become involved after repeated absences.

If home schoolers stop opening the books (or never do open them), it's between parent and child. No one else knows.

School superintendents and other child professionals say an unknown number of children receive an inadequate education at home, but those children have no third-party advocates.

If states require little or no academic accountability and parents restrict contact outside the home-schooling world, failure can remain undetected for years.

Sometimes it's only a tragic event that shines a light on the quality of home education.

Such was the case of home schooler Molly Holt, 10. When her house near Clarksville, Ark., burned down in November 2003, investigators found Molly's skeletal remains shackled to her bed. Her parents were charged with manslaughter and false imprisonment.

Although the shackles made headlines, her death caused angst in the Arkansas capital as state educators and lawmakers questioned the efficacy of home schooling.

An Arkansas newspaper quoted Molly's grandfather as saying that Molly could not read or write. (He did not return phone calls or respond to a letter seeking comment for this story.)

Molly's mother, Teresa Dick, agreed to discuss her daughter's education with the Beacon Journal. (Later, she was convicted on the criminal charges. Molly's father's case is pending.)

Dick said Molly had trouble with her first-grade special education class. Dick filed a notification of home schooling in 2000 to remove Molly from school, but failed to renew the registration in any of the next three years.

Chaining Molly to her bed was necessary because she was a behavioral problem and a threat to her siblings, Dick said.

As the Molly Holt story broke last fall and the news media raised questions about the type of schooling she was receiving at home, Jerry Cox, president of the Arkansas home-schooling advocacy group Education Alliance, issued a statement saying home education wasn't an issue because Molly's parents had failed to renew her registration.

Failure to file paperwork meant she was truant and not a home schooler, he said.

“If anyone has failed, it is the Clarksville Public Schools and others who are responsible for monitoring and prosecuting truancy,” Cox said. “Instead of taking responsibility for their failure, they have unfairly blamed home schooling for this terrible situation.”

Cox didn't answer requests for an interview.

Brian Ray, a home-schooling father who runs the National Home Education Research Institute in Salem, Ore., was critical of Cox's statement.

“For a home-school organization to say, ‘Yeah, they came to the support group and they said they were home-schooled, but all of a sudden because they did something evil, we don't think they are home-schooled,’ that's just ridiculous,” Ray told the Beacon Journal.

He said that if a family says it is home schooling, he counts it among home schoolers. He estimates that in some states, as many as half of the home schoolers don't comply with registration laws.

Teresa Dick considered herself a home schooler, even though she failed to renew the registration. She said she was confident that Molly was making progress and was at a second- or third-grade level. Dick said she knew this from tests she designed for Molly, although she administered no national standardized exams.

Molly's skills might have become known last year, when she would have been eligible for state testing.

Arkansas is one of 11 states that HSLDA said requires testing of home schoolers. Children there must take the Stanford Achievement tests in the fifth, seventh and 10th grades.

Stanford Achievement scores, obtained by the Beacon Journal, show the performance of Arkansas home schoolers to be in decline. In the most recent year, the average scores were a few percentage points above the national average for all students who take the Stanford tests.

Immediately after Molly's death, Arkansas officials reviewed test information and found that about one-fourth of the state's registered home-schooled children don't show up for the required exams. The study didn't account for the unknown number who are unregistered, as was Molly.

If Belfield is correct about those who don't take tests, the 25 percent who are known to skip could drag Arkansas' performance lower.

However, the HSLDA's Smith defended those scores. He said the missing children often aren't real home schoolers. Like Cox, he said they are truants and probably are already in trouble with the law.

He said he's confident that in any state, the scores of real home schoolers will surpass those of the general population.

Home schoolers as a group generally score about 10 percentage points above the national average, he said. “That's accurate. You can say home schoolers do better academically.”

That makes sense, he said, because the one-on-one “tutorial method is superior to a classroom setting. That's that,” Smith said.

State oversight

Arkansas' testing of home schoolers doesn't begin until the fifth grade, and Arkansas parents are allowed to wait until the child is the age of a typical seventh-grader to have the child take the fifth-grade test.

By then, children are well beyond their formative years.

That's not unusual in home-school oversight.

Half the states have laws requiring academic assessments of home schoolers. In practice, though, officials in state after state said those assessments are of little value.

States with testing -- home to about one-fourth of all home schoolers -- may wait until high school to do the testing. Most of those states never ask to see the child's scores, instead trusting parents to do the testing, obtain the results, interpret them and adjust their teaching.

Those states not requiring testing ask for academic appraisals, usually once a year.

Before Ohio parents can begin home schooling for a second year, they must provide one of three kinds of academic appraisals to the local superintendent:

- Parents can submit scores from standardized tests, but few do so, according to a statewide survey of superintendents the Beacon Journal conducted.
- Parents can submit a portfolio that they and the superintendent agree would be a fair representation of the child's work. Again, few choose this option.
- Most home-schooling parents in Ohio -- and other states -- provide an "academic assessment" from a certified teacher.

Yet most Ohio superintendents say the assessments are worthless. If the superintendents suspect the child is having problems but the assessment doesn't show that, they are not permitted to ask questions.

David Rossman, superintendent of Elmwood schools near Toledo, said that in 21 years, he has never seen an assessment that said a student was failing.

"I have known of students that have dropped out of school by the sixth grade under the 'home school' umbrella. We knew they were doing no schooling at all... but there is nothing you can do about it," Rossman said.

Several superintendents said the only time they've proved that a home schooler was making inadequate progress was when parents submitted standardized test scores showing the child scored in the bottom 25 percent nationally -- deemed unacceptable in Ohio.

Those families are required to enter into a remediation plan for the following year. What parents learn from the remediation, superintendents said, is never to submit scores again -- instead submit an assessment.

Home schoolers also can move from one district to another to avoid an assessment. Tammi Jordan, home education liaison at the Ohio Department of Education, said home schoolers who move during summer break do not have to file an assessment for the school year that just ended.

Lou Ann Harrold, former superintendent of the Hardin County Educational Service Center in southern Ohio and a newly elected member of the state school board, said she sometimes tried to confirm that assessors have the required teaching certificate. She found that one assessor had

an expired license. When she alerted the state Department of Education, she said she was told she couldn't enforce the law.

Missy's assessment

Nick Campbell of Aurora, Colo., was troubled in 2002 to find that a home-schooled teen-ager in his neighborhood couldn't read but had received satisfactory academic assessments. He decided to see how easily he could get an assessment for his 6-year-old, Missy.

The assessment was conducted by mail. He answered a few questions about Missy, sent along \$25 and waited.

“There never was a word spoken between us,” Campbell said of the assessor.

A short time later, an assessor delivered a favorable report to the superintendent of Campbell's school district saying that Missy Campbell was making adequate academic progress.

If the assessor had made one phone call, or asked a probing question, Campbell said, he would have volunteered that Missy is a miniature schnauzer.

“It's a free-for-all,” he said.

A Denver newspaper criticized Campbell and the state legislator who proposed tougher standards as a result of the experiment. An editorial said Campbell had committed the only abuse of the system.

“Are home-schooling parents fabricating evidence for progress reports? If that were happening with any frequency, we might understand the justification for tighter laws,” the Rocky Mountain News wrote.

“Missy's certificate doesn't prove anything about home-schooling parents, though, because Campbell isn't one,” the paper wrote. “He's a dog owner, trying to make a point by deceiving a professional acting in good faith.”

Success vs. failure

During the past year, the Beacon Journal interviewed nine researchers whose studies on home schooling are most often quoted. They have done original research and include representatives of Columbia and Stanford universities and the Education Commission for the States. They agreed: There is no statistical evidence that children who are kept home to be educated perform at a much higher level than public school students.

Yet in Congress, a bill -- proposed in cooperation with the HSLDA -- would give home schoolers more freedoms, access to federally funded college scholarships and protection from oversight.

The reason, the bill says, is because home schooling is successful.

“Education by parents at home has proven to be an effective means for young people to achieve success on standardized tests,” the bill says, in part.

U.S. Rep. John Boehner, R-West Chester, one of the strongest proponents of collecting more data on public schools and holding them accountable under the No Child Left Behind Act, is one of the bill's co-sponsors.

But while everyone acknowledges there are failures, no one knows how many or where they are, and many school officials have no authority to challenge the parents.

A social worker in a Beacon Journal focus group said: "It is a problem even if it is a small minority group of children. We need to take care of those children, too. They can't take care of themselves."

Delaine Eastin, who was twice elected superintendent of California's public school system, said many home-schooling families are doing a wonderful job, but there were too many instances in her state where home-schooled 18-year-olds were illiterate.

At a time when No Child Left Behind is imposing financial penalties on states for falling short of goals, Eastin said, the federal and state governments are ignoring home schoolers.

"We're making such a fuss about accountability for some and no accountability for others," Eastin said. "Shouldn't we pay some attention to the home schoolers?"