

Homeschooling in Alberta: The Choices, Contexts, and Consequences of a Developing System

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Executive Summary

Over the past four decades, homeschooling has steadily grown in Alberta from an unconventional approach to K-12 education to a program of choice enshrined in the *Education Act*. In this alternative method of education, parents are responsible for managing, delivering, and supervising their children’s education, and learning primarily takes place outside of an institutional setting. In 2019, the number of homeschooled students in Alberta (n=13,689) was more than one-third of all homeschooled students in Canada. By 2020-21, the number of homeschooled students in the province nearly doubled in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the growth in enrolment and the expansion of programs and systems of homeschooling in Alberta, public understanding remains on the fringes.

This report surveys the academic literature of homeschool research and reviews governmental and organizational documents and policies related to home education in Alberta. In doing so, it uncovers recent legislative changes that are altering the home education landscape in Alberta. Since September 2020, home education programs are not required to be supervised by a school authority (as was previously the case for more than thirty years)—marking a significant shift to loosen homeschool regulations related to oversight and accountability.

The deregulation of homeschooling in Alberta is intended to give parents more choice and control to educate their children at home, without any external restrictions or directives. Homeschooling that is not supervised, however, removes any opportunity for professional teachers to monitor, assess, or support the learning of such students. It also eliminates the opportunity to monitor the safety of these children in an effort to reduce the risks of child maltreatment. Moreover, home education that is not supervised by a school authority is less likely to follow the provincial curriculum – whether it be because of distrust in the prevailing system or the absence of accountability measures in place – which can result in learners that lack exposure to a variety of perspectives and important bodies of knowledge. Additionally, homeschooled students in Alberta that do not follow the provincial curriculum may encounter difficulties when transitioning to post-secondary education. To ensure a certain degree of quality, equity, and equality of opportunity in Alberta’s K-12 education system, high regulatory standards should therefore be a top priority for home education programs and systems in Alberta.

As an educational practice, homeschooling involves a wide spectrum of approaches with varying degrees of formality, structure, and supervision. This report examines the differences between supervised and non-supervised programs, including the divergent responsibilities of parents and school authorities in each program. It provides a brief case study of a private Christian school that subcontracted its supervisory responsibilities for nearly 3,500 homeschooled students to a third-party contractor, which spurred an investigation by Alberta Education in 2016. Structured and unstructured homeschooling are also considered, along with “co-operatives” involving networks of homeschoolers, and blended programs comprising both teacher and parent-directed home education. It is important to understand the different approaches by which homeschooling is conducted in order to recognize the wide scope of impacts.

A review of the literature reveals that homeschooling parents are predominantly motivated by five main factors: religious motives, pedagogical or academic concerns, dissatisfaction with traditional schools, desire to strengthen family connections, and pragmatic reasons based on various life situations. This report also reviews the impact of homeschooling in terms of academic achievement, socialization, and physical and mental health. Much of the research on homeschooler outcomes is not based on rigorous empirical studies, and consequently, there is still a lot to be desired in terms of what we know about the cognitive, social, and health-related impacts of homeschooling. Yet, some patterns are emerging.

This report also considers the fiscal impact of homeschooling in Alberta. In 2019-20, Alberta Education disbursed more than \$23 million to offset the costs of supervised homeschooling, but the net financial “savings” for the provincial government linked to home education provisions was more than \$127 million. However, there are hidden costs associated with homeschooling that could lessen any potential net gain. The real costs of homeschooling fall on the backs of parents that forgo a paid income or career advancement to stay at home as well as the loss of tax revenues from those missed incomes.

The regulatory standards, student population, and development of homeschooling in Alberta should not be overlooked by decision-makers, school officials, professionals, parents, and engaged citizens. Especially, while parental choice is prioritized over public education, and the highest standards of educational quality, equity, and innovation remain top of mind.

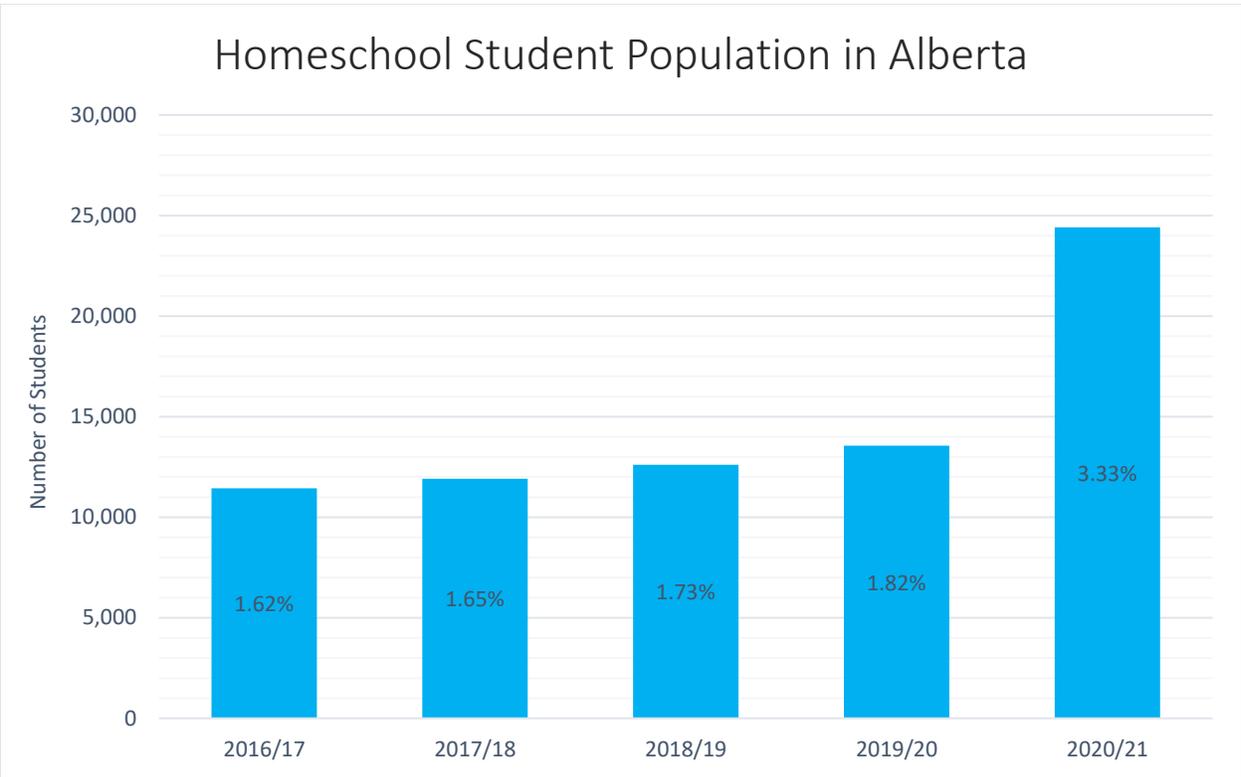
Introduction

Before the establishment of modern-era public schooling, education was predominantly done at home under the direction of parents or guardians. Throughout most of human history, in fact, parents have assumed the responsibility for educating their children. In the years following Canada's confederation in 1867, schooling became funded and regulated by provincial ministries of education and delivered by local school districts. Homeschooling resurfaced in Alberta by the early 1980s as a practiced, yet unconventional approach to K-12 education. It was adopted particularly by parents wanting to reassert their essential role and responsibility in the education of their children. According to Statistics Canada, "homeschooling is an alternative method of learning that takes place outside the public or private/independent school environment. Parents choosing homeschooling have the primary responsibility of managing, delivering and supervising their children's courses and programs of learning" (Statistics Canada, 2019).

Alberta's laws recognize that parents have the right to choose the kind of schooling provided to their children, including elective home-based education. Since 1988, homeschooling has been recognized as a viable option that fulfills the requirements of compulsory school attendance for youth in Alberta.¹ Taking it another step further, Alberta's recently legislated *Choice in Education Act* (2020) explicitly states that homeschooling should be supported and protected as an integral option in the provision of choice. A government liaison with the Alberta Home Education Association expressed support by stating: "Parental choice being enshrined within the *Education Act* as promised, and home education being equally acknowledged as an option for families deciding which education model they feel best suits each individual child, is a welcome step forward" (Sundal, 2020). Homeschooling, therefore, is increasingly shifting from an unconventional to a mainstream option for Alberta families in the provision of school choice.

In Alberta, the number of families choosing to educate their children at home is steadily rising. In 2019-20, the number of homeschooled students was 13,558 (or 1.8% of the total number of students enrolled in all schools throughout Alberta). The following year, in 2020-21, the number of homeschooled students increased considerably to 24,417 (or 3.3% of Alberta's entire K-12 population). The upsurge in homeschooled students in 2020-21 was a direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the new realities and situations faced by families. It is yet to be seen if the shift to homeschooling in 2020 will continue in the next year, and beyond. Nevertheless, with a total share of enrolment ranging from 1.8% to 3.3%, the homeschool student population in Alberta is comparable to the combined student enrolment in all charter and Francophone schools in the province (2.5% or 18,587). Even before the Covid-spike, the number of homeschooled students in Alberta in 2019 (n=13,689) was already more than one-third of all homeschooled students in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020). The graph below illustrates the growth of the homeschool student population in Alberta over the past five years.

¹ A growing number of countries also accept home education under compulsory education requirements. For example, homeschooling is legal in Australia, Denmark, England, France, India, Ireland, Israel, New Zealand, Russia, United States, and other countries. However, homeschooling is not legal in a host of countries, including Brazil, China, Cuba, Germany, Greece, Sweden, and Turkey (Home School Legal Defense Association [HSLDA], 2021).



Source: Government of Alberta (2021a)

The following report will explore the (1) social and legal foundations of the homeschooling movement, particularly in the case of Alberta; (2) various approaches to homeschooling, including supervised, non-supervised, structured, non-structured, cooperatives, and blended programs; (3) parental motivations for homeschooling; (4) outcomes of homeschooling, including academic achievement, socialization, and physical and mental health; and, (5) homeschooling regulations, funding, and fiscal impacts in Alberta. The data and analysis that informs this report is based on a review of governmental documents and policies related to homeschooling in Alberta, a review of homeschooling associations operating in the province, and an extensive review of the scholarly literature related to home education.

The Social and Legal Foundations of Homeschooling in Alberta

Homeschooling is not a new practice. Most families in North America provided education and training to youth at home, in the fields, or the workshop until the mid-19th century because no other option was available. It was not until free public schools became more widely available – backed by the fiscal and legal authority of the state – that families shifted from informal to formal education. By the 19th century, the doctrine of *parens patriae* (a Latin phrase meaning “parent of the country”) was also increasingly invoked in law, which gave power to the state to act as the

ultimate protector of children (Blokhius, 2010; Dwyer & Peters, 2019). In turn, legislatures throughout North America began to set up public schools, ratify compulsory education laws, and eventually assume responsibility for the education of children in order to protect and promote their welfare (Neuman & Guterman, 2017; Wilhelm & Firmin, 2009).

As free public schools began to expand in the latter half of the 19th century throughout Alberta, and the rest of North America, homeschooling did continue but in limited capacity. It was not until the 1960s that this educational practice received renewed attention and interest from parents and educators. In the 1960s, Dr. Raymond Moore, a Seventh-day Adventist and analyst for the United States Department of Education, began to comprehensively study the institutionalization of children's education and its impacts. "Moore concluded that subjecting young children to institutionalized schooling actually hindered their intellectual development" (Dwyer & Peters, 2019, p. 41). He suggested that entry into formal schools should be delayed until ages 8 to 12. As a substitute, Moore actively promoted homeschooling as the best alternative to institutionalized schooling. Moore's vision of homeschooling emphasized religious teachings from a Christian perspective within a structured environment that taught the basics and promoted the authority of the family.

Another central figure in the origins of the modern-day homeschooling movement was John Holt. Rather than promote religious-based homeschooling, however, Holt inspired the idea of "unschooling"—a freely permissive, unstructured, and non-interventionist form of homeschooling. Holt was a schoolteacher that became disillusioned with public schools, who would later go onto author two landmark books: *Why Children Fail* (1964) and *How Children Learn* (1967). Holt's books strongly criticized conventional schooling systems for their repressive environments that stifle children's natural curiosities, independent thinking, and self-discovery through regimented schooling practices (Dwyer & Peters, 2019). Initially, Holt believed that schools could and should be transformed to engender more authentic learning. However, his perspective changed over time to reject compulsory education altogether, and focus on the spread of unschooling. While the education establishment paid little attention to Holt or his writings at the time, his ideas appealed to a subculture of families across North America. In an effort to develop a network of homeschooling practitioners and enthusiasts, Holt began publishing a newsletter in 1977 entitled *Growing Without Schooling* that further catalyzed the liberal branch of the homeschooling movement.

Raymond Moore, a former Christian missionary, and John Holt, a libertarian humanist, represented the two most prominent factions of the homeschooling movement. Moore attracted families that were motivated to impart traditional religious teachings at home (i.e. parents concerned with *what* children were taught), and Holt attracted the countercultural left that viewed homeschooling as a liberating educational practice (i.e. parents concerned with *how* children were taught). Although their approaches diverged, they did share some fundamental commonalities that Holt described as "old-fashioned independence, a skepticism of experts, and a willingness to trust themselves" (Holt cited in Bumstead, 1979). During the 1970s, the Holt-inspired un-schoolers represented the majority of homeschooling families in North America. However, by the mid-1980s most of the homeschooling parents were part of the Christian right,

“a trend that would change the nature of homeschooling from a crusade against ‘the establishment’ to a crusade against the secularization of modern society” (Lagos, 2011, p. 60-1). By 2000, 75% of homeschooling families in North America were practicing Christians (Lagos, 2011).

The growth of the Christian homeschooling movement since the 1980s was largely supported through the legal efforts and leadership of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA)—a powerful conservative Christian advocacy organization in the United States. In both Canada and the United States, the HSLDA has orchestrated a number of legislative and judicial victories on behalf of Christian families and in support of their parental rights to choose homeschooling (Lagos, 2011). For all intents and purposes, homeschool advocates in Canada have therefore aligned their mission with three broad themes: choice, parental freedom, and individual rights (Davies & Aurini, 2003).

The homeschooling movement is therefore intrinsically linked to the “school choice” movement since they both emphasize, above all else, parental choice and control to decide the education of their children. Parents that choose not to involve their children in formal schooling and instead educate their children at home, therefore, is an expression of school choice. Yet, it does raise questions about “the right of parents to control the education of their children, the responsibility of the state to protect the interests of children, and the right of the student to develop independent judgment, self-determination, and competency for liberal citizenship” (Bosetti & Van Pelt, 2017, p, 44-45). Indeed, it is a balancing act concerning the rights and responsibilities of parents, students, and governments.

From the perspective of the Alberta Home Education Association (AHEA), “parents have the sole right and responsibility to determine the methods and instruments to be used to ensure the educational welfare of the child” (AHEA, 2021a). AHEA was established in 1986 by a group of parents concerned with the secularization of schooling in Alberta. According to AHEA, it “acts as a liaison between home educators, the Provincial Government, and other organizations, with a focus on preserving the rights and freedoms of homeschooling parents in Alberta” (AHEA, 2021b). The Alberta Homeschooling Association (AHSa), another agency representing homeschooling families in the province, was also formed in the 1980s. The two “agencies can best be delineated by their respective understanding of parental versus governmental authority” as the AHSa advocated for parental authority above the government’s, “while AHEA simply accepted the government’s claims to having the authority in the education of the province’s children” (Gaumont, 2021). Hence, the approach of the AHEA has been to seek “permission from the government to do what God has clearly intended to be a parental prerogative and responsibility” (Gaumont, 2021).

In 1987, Alberta’s *School Act*, under Bill 59, endorsed home education programs. They were ordered to comply with basic regulations while operating under the supervision of a school board. In 1985, there was an estimated 55 home educators in Alberta, and by 1989 the number rose to 1244 (AHEA, 2021c). Today, the province of Alberta is home to the largest population of homeschooled students in the entire country, with nearly 25,000. In 2020, the Government of

Alberta amended the *Education Act* to roll-back the requirement for home education programs to be supervised by a school authority—representing a significant move to deregulate homeschooling in the province.

In their advocacy efforts, both the Alberta Home Education Association and Alberta Homeschooling Association promote homeschooling on the basis of Article 26.3 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* adopted by the United Nations. It states that “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind the education that shall be given to their children” (United Nations, 1948). Alberta’s *Choice in Education Act* followed suite and added Article 26.3 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* to the preamble of the new *Act*. Furthermore, the amended *Education Act* specifically refers to “home education programs as being valued and integral in providing choice in education to students and parents” (*Choice in Education Act*, 2020, p. 1). Upon the announcement of this new legislation, Premier Jason Kenney declared that it affirms that “parents have the primary right to choose the education their children receive. Parents, not politicians, know what is best for their kids” (Kenney, 2020). In the case of unsupervised homeschooling, this refutes the principle of *parens patriae* (governmental protection over children in society) and reaffirms parental authority above state authority.

Home education programs in Alberta, and elsewhere, have therefore gained credence since the mid-1980s in part due to conservative Christian protectionism, anti-establishment champions, and the broader school choice movement. The unifying theme, however, is the issue of parental freedom and individual rights to choose the type of education a child receives, which has been central to the social and legal foundations of the homeschooling movement.

Approaches to Homeschooling

This section will focus on the many different ways in which families may organize, undertake, and perform homeschooling. Parents that educate their children at home are responsible for making all decisions related to managing, delivering, and supervising their children’s educational program. In Alberta, homeschooling parents provide structured as well as non-structured learning programs that are supervised or non-supervised, they can participate in homeschool groups and cooperatives, or they can set up a blended program that comprises both teacher and parent-directed home education. In turn, homeschooling encompasses a wide spectrum of approaches with varying degrees of structure, formality, and supervision. This section will explore the broad styles and methods of homeschooling in Alberta, including (1) supervised, (2) non-supervised, (3) structured, (4) non-structured, (4) cooperatives, and (5) blended or shared responsibility programs.

Structured

In the delivery of home education programs, parents determine the degree to which learning is structured, or not. Structured home education is homeschooling that occurs according to lesson plans and a defined curriculum. It may involve routines and things found in traditional schools like timetables, classes, textbooks, workbooks, and exams—reflecting a type of structured learning that is merely done at home. One of the most consistent findings in the literature on homeschooling practices is that “after a year or two of assiduous effort to mimic formal schooling at home, new homeschooling mothers gradually move toward a less-structured, more eclectic approach” (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020, p. 266; Lois, 2006; Gann & Carpenter, 2019; Gray & Riley, 2013; Stevens, 2001).

Neuman & Guterman (2017b) suggest that the degree of structure in homeschooling should be considered both in terms of *content* and *process*. “The degree of structure in the content examines to what extent the parents dictate the content of learning (or the curriculum), and the degree of structure in the process examines to what extent the parents dictate the learning process” (Neuman & Guterman 2017b, p. 358). In terms of the structure of home education, it is therefore possible to have four different scenarios:

- Structured process and structured content
- Structured process and unstructured content
- Structured content and unstructured process
- Unstructured content and unstructured process

For example, families that educate at home may require their children to learn mathematics (structured content), but the process of learning, including the time and place, may be largely guided by the child (unstructured process). Or, homeschooling families may employ a schedule of lessons or classes that take place at set times (structured process), but the child chooses the topic of the lesson or the class themselves (unstructured content). It is also possible that home education is completely structured or completely unstructured in terms of both content and process.

It is increasingly clear that “homeschooling happens along a continuum between the formal and informal both in terms of curricular content and pedagogical processes” (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020, p. 266). The difference between formal and informal homeschooling is the extent to which curricular content and pedagogical processes are preplanned, structured, and devoted to instruction. Guterman & Neuman (2018) suggest that more structured homeschooling is positively correlated to family income, conscientiousness, and the mother’s educational background. Supervised homeschooling in Alberta is intended to help provide some degree of structure by helping to define a curriculum and establish an educational program plan.

Non-structured

Whereas structured homeschooling may involve doing “school at home,” unstructured homeschooling lacks the routines, schedules, and pre-set curricula found in structured educational programs. Unstructured homeschooling may be intentional or unintentional—it can occur when parents lack the time, energy, knowledge, or resources to plan detailed homeschooling programs. Or, it may be that parents simply view unstructured homeschooling as a better alternative than regimented, disciplined, and standardized schooling typically found in formal education (Neuman & Guterman, 2019; Stevens, 2001).

Those who deliberately implement unstructured home education – for either pedagogical or cultural reasons – commonly refer to it as “unschooling.” Unschooling is a countercultural movement inspired by John Holt that began in the United States in the 1970s. It is a theory of learning that follows no set curriculum, and children learn primarily through everyday life experiences. Gray & Riley (2013) explain that:

Unschoolers do not send their children to school and they do not do at home the kinds of things that are done at school. More specifically, they do not establish a curriculum for their children, they do not require their children to do particular assignments for the purpose of education, and they do not test their children to measure progress. Instead, they allow their children freedom to pursue their own interests and to learn, in their own ways, what they need to know to follow those interests. They also, in various ways, provide an environmental context and environmental support for the child's learning. Life and learning do not occur in a vacuum; they occur in the context of a cultural environment, and unschooling parents help define and bring the child into contact with that environment. (Gray & Riley, 2013, p. 7)

It is an approach to homeschooling in which parents facilitate their child’s learning in a self-directed manner that emphasizes free play, trust, and autonomy (Gray & Riley, 2013; O’Hare & Coyne, 2020). “What the children study is up to them; the curriculum is largely student-directed” (Morrison, 2007, p. 45).

In their study of 232 unschooling families in the United States, Gray & Riley (2013) reported that unschooling children benefited from more efficient learning, a greater intrinsic interest in learning, and improved social and emotional well-being. To be clear, however, there is a significant lack of academic research on unschooling practices, experiences, and impacts. The Gray & Riley (2013) study was not random, but based on self-reporting. Although mainstream media has shown some interest in the unschooling phenomenon, the research is fraught. Much of the research has been conducted by outspoken advocates of unschooling. However, there is some evidence that children in unschooling environments underperform on academic assessments compared to children in structured homeschooling environments (Martin-Chang, Gould, & Meuse, 2011; Martin-Chang & Levesque, 2017).

It is reasonable to assume that the nature of homeschooling, whether it be structured or unstructured, has a significant effect on the child. For this reason, “it is important to understand the manner in which parents are actually conducting homeschooling” (Guterman & Neuman, 2018, p. 78). Our ability to understand the manner in which parents are conducting homeschooling, however, is severely limited due to the lack of external oversight, monitoring, and supervision.

Supervised

Beginning September 1, 2020, families in Alberta may choose either a supervised or non-supervised home education program. A supervised program is overseen by a willing school authority (either a public, separate or Francophone school board or an accredited private school). Although a home education program may be supervised by a school authority, the Government of Alberta stipulates that “parents choosing home education have the primary responsibility for planning, managing, providing, evaluating and supervising their children’s courses of study. They must develop a home education program that enables the student to achieve appropriate learning outcomes” (Government of Alberta, 2021b). Consequently, parents can register in a supervised home education program, but they are ultimately responsible for all aspects of the educational program, including learning content, processes, and outcomes.

Even with regular supervision, there are no rules about what children are taught at home. Homeschoolers may choose to follow the provincial curriculum, which indicates the learning outcomes for all grade levels and subjects, or they may choose not to. Or, a home education program may choose to follow the [*Schedule of Learning Outcomes for Students Receiving Home Education Programs That Do Not Follow the Alberta Programs of Study*](#), which is a list of twenty-two general learning outcomes. If the provincial curriculum is not followed, according to Alberta’s *Home Education Handbook*, the parent providing a supervised home education program must provide a detailed account of the educational program to be delivered, including a list of learning activities, an explanation as to how those activities will enable the student to achieve the applicable outcomes, the instructional methods and resources used, and the means by which a student’s progress will be evaluated (Alberta Education, 2010). Parents develop the education program, and the supervising school authority accepts the program. Still, it is not required that a homeschooling program developed by a parent follow provincial educational standards, or include information that would prepare students to write provincial or standardized exams.

Supervised home education programs in Alberta entail a number of responsibilities on the part of the school board or private school that has agreed to supervise the program. If requested, the associate school board or private school supervising a home education program must offer assistance and advice to parents to improve student learning. The supervising school authority must also assign one of their certificated teachers to conduct at least two formal evaluations each year for each homeschooled student to assess their progress. These evaluations include a

review of the student’s portfolio of work as well as recommendations that may help the student achieve a higher level of learning (Government of Alberta, 2021b).

Subcontracting homeschool supervision:

A brief case study of Trinity Christian School and Wisdom Home School Society of Alberta

There are cases of supervising school authorities in Alberta, predominantly private Christian schools, using a third-party contractor, such as a homeschooling organization or “society” to deliver homeschooling programs. An illuminating example of which is the case of Trinity Christian School Association (Trinity) and Wisdom Home School Society of Alberta (Wisdom). Trinity was an accredited funded private school operating in Cold Lake, Alberta since 1994. On average, it enrolled thirteen students at its private school. But it was the supervising school authority for nearly 3,500 home education students. Since 1995, Trinity subcontracted Wisdom Home Schooling, a third-party provider, to run its homeschooling program. It was the largest privately run association of its kind in Alberta, registering almost a third of the province’s homeschooling student population. It was also a joint family effort, as the boards and administration of Trinity and Wisdom were essentially made up of two families. In 2016, however, this private school and homeschooling society were the subject of an investigative review conducted by Alberta Education.

At the time of the government review, Trinity was receiving approximately \$5.5 million each year in Alberta Education funding. Almost all of which was passed directly onto Wisdom, even though Alberta Education had “no relationship” with this third-party contractor (Alberta Education, 2016). From 2012 to 2015, nearly \$2.8 million was paid out to members of the two families which comprised the board and administrative roles of the Trinity/Wisdom operation. Family members approved employment deals for each other “leading to exorbitant administration remuneration spending” (Alberta Education, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, the findings of the Alberta Education report indicate that Trinity failed to comply with *Home Education Regulations* since none of the teachers in charge of supervising home education programs were actually employed by Trinity—but rather, these “facilitators” were independent contractors providing services to Wisdom (Alberta Education, 2016). Although Trinity was the supervising school authority, Wisdom was in full control over all aspects of the home education program, contrary to legislative requirements. The Alberta Education report also highlighted a number of examples of “financial irregularities” including the misuse of public funds through questionable lease agreements, exorbitant administrative costs, and improperly withholding the (\$850) parent portion of home education funding—totalling \$988,000 collected from grant money that should have flowed to parents for homeschooling costs (Alberta Education, 2016). The report recommended that the Ministry of Education cancel Trinity’s accreditation and registration because the private school authority “failed to appropriately supervise its home education program” and “has failed to demonstrate accountability for funding received from the government of Alberta” (Alberta Education, 2016, p. 7).

On October 25, 2016, Alberta Education closed Trinity and its affiliate, Wisdom Home School Society, following a comprehensive audit of the organization. However, members of Trinity and Wisdom took the issue to provincial court, which ruled in favour of an injunction to allow the private school and homeschooling society to continue to operate but in accordance with legislative requirements and new terms of operation. In August, 2020, Trinity Christian School Association announced it was ending its private school operations due to low enrolment. The Wisdom Home School Society now operates home education programs under the supervision of the Gilbertine Academy, which is an associate Christian private school located in Calgary. This example illustrates the way in which private school authorities have used third-party contractors to deliver far-reaching home education programs throughout the province, and the issues that may arise related to the supervision, authority, and accountability of such programs.

Non-supervised

Since 2020, a parent or guardian in Alberta may also choose to provide a home education program that is not supervised by a school authority. In this case, notification is the only obligation of the parent. Through a mailed-in submission or online form, parents must notify the government of their intent to home educate their children. At the same time, they must also agree, by signing a declaration, to implement a home education program with activities that enable the student to achieve applicable learning outcomes (Government of Alberta, 2021b). However, there is no oversight or accountability measures in place to ensure that learning outcomes are reasonably achieved. Under this model, homeschooling parents are advised to develop an educational program plan for their children, but the program plan is not required by the Ministry of Education. The parent has complete responsibility and control over every aspect of the educational program; with no supervision or monitoring on the part of any school or governmental authority.

Cooperatives

Families choosing to educate their children at home have increasingly coalesced to form homeschooling groups and cooperatives. These can range from relaxed relationships among homeschoolers that offer mutual support to organized cooperatives that look similar to institutionalized schooling. The least formal are the “support groups” that meet in homes, on playgrounds, and/or online for the purpose of mutual support and encouragement (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020; Safran, 2009). Somewhat more formal are “timetabled groups” which help parents to learn from each other’s practices and share resources at a regularly-designated time and location (Safran, 2009). Then there are homeschooling cooperatives, or “co-op groups,” which replicate traditional schooling in many ways (Anthony, 2015). Homeschooling cooperatives typically involve families that meet together in a rented space to conduct classes in groups that are taught by parents, or on occasion, by hired experts (Anthony, 2015; Safran, 2009). This type

of cooperative homeschooling may adopt many of the institutional features of formal schooling including classes, classmates, classrooms, directed instruction, and curricular objectives, but with the independence permitted through homeschooling. The organization of homeschooling cooperatives, although marginal, resembles a newly emerging form of institutionalized schooling. Homeschooling “societies” like the Wisdom Home School Society of Alberta (previously discussed) are similar to homeschool cooperative groups since Wisdom initially started when two homeschooling families joined their efforts to build and support a network of homeschooling families throughout the province.

Blended/Shared Responsibility Programs

Beyond structured and unstructured approaches to homeschooling as well as groups and cooperatives, families may also decide they want a blended program that combines both teacher-directed and parent-directed home-based schooling. In Alberta, it is also referred to as a “shared responsibility” program—since a homeschooling parent reaches an agreement with an associate school board or associate private school to share the responsibility and duties for a particular home education program. In Alberta, this blended approach to homeschooling involves a certificated teacher (employed by a school authority) that performs a number of duties, including planning, selecting resources, assessing, and evaluating student progress, while delivering selected courses that follow the provincial curriculum (Government of Alberta, 2021c).

In a shared responsibility program, the school authority (i.e., teacher-directed component) is responsible for a minimum of 20% to a maximum of 80% of the student’s program in Grades 1 to 12. The remaining portion of the program is the responsibility of the parent. Outside of this range, (below 20%) students should be enrolled as home education students, or (above 80%) students should be enrolled as a regular or online student with a school authority (Government of Alberta, 2021c). Funding provided by Alberta Education for this type of blended programming is calculated “based on the proportion of the student’s education program that the school authority and parent each accept” (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 3). There are online programs that are also teacher-directed home-based school programs, which are not considered home education since a school board or private school is fully responsible for the program, as if it were regular school done online.

In Alberta, school boards and accredited private school operators are not legally required to offer blended programs. However, a number of private/independent schools have emerged that specialize in offering blended programs as well as home education supervision, such as Bearspaw Christian School Society, Gilbertine Academy, Phoenix Education Foundation, and Summit West Independent School. This indicates that competition from homeschooling is encouraging conventional schools to develop new institutional services designed specifically to accommodate homeschooled children, including the development of more flexible school programs that permit homeschoolers to complete their education through multiple venues, both at home and school. This type of blended schooling is also referred to as flexi-schooling.

Why do Parents Choose Homeschooling?

Parents who choose to educate their children at home, do so for a number of reasons. This section provides a meta-analysis of the relevant literature focusing on the range of factors motivating parents to homeschool. Based on this literature review, five categories have been identified that describe the reasons why parents choose to home educate their children. They are (1) religious motives; (2) pedagogical or academic reasons, such as special or unique learning needs; (3) dissatisfaction with traditional schools; (4) maintenance of the family unit; and (5) pragmatic reasons based on various life situations. Despite these broad categorizations, parental motivations are multilayered, and oftentimes changing over time.

Religious Motives

With the increasingly secular nature of public schooling, religiously motivated parents in North America, and elsewhere, have turned to homeschooling as a way to ensure their children are educated in a context dedicated to religious, particularly Christian, teachings. Largely following a philosophy of Christian fundamentalism, these parents wish to pass onto their children a religious set of beliefs, values, perspectives, and morals which they believe to be absent in public education institutions (Cai, Reeves & Robinson, 2002). In turn, they are motivated by a disagreement with schools in terms of values (Beck, 2010) and “because they disagree with the ideological content of the curriculum” (Brabant, Bourdon & Jutras, 2003, p. 114). Those motivated to home educate their children for religious purposes emphasize both family and conservative values, and the authority of parents to control the education of their children as they see fit (Stevens, 2001). As the Alberta Home Education Association states, for example, the organization “values parents as having the God-given right and responsibility to direct the education of their children” (AHEA, 2021a). Religiously motivated homeschooling parents typically do follow the same type of structured learning routines found in institutional learning environments such as a formal curriculum, full schedules, instructional authority, among other features, but with an emphasis on religious content and teachings (Guterman & Neuman, 2018). Across the literature, including national statistics in the U.S., religious motives are consistently mentioned as one of the most cited reasons why parents choose to educate their children at home (McQuiggan, Megra & Grady, 2017; Noel, Stark & Redford, 2016; Redford, Battle & Bieleck, 2017). However, it is worthwhile to point out that families identifying as religious conservatives may still have other motivations for homeschooling beyond religion (Sherfinski & Chesanko, 2014).

Pedagogical or Academic Reasons

Pedagogical beliefs are an important factor for parents choosing to homeschool. Parents may be motivated to educate their children at home so they can provide more personalized attention and tailored forms of pedagogy. Homeschooling parents, therefore, may be motivated by a desire to pursue an educational alternative that is individually-attuned to the learning styles and unique

talents of their children (Collom 2005; Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). Studying homeschooling motivations in Ontario, Aurini and Davies (2005) emphasize that “homeschoolers stress the highly individualized nature of child development” and “prize a customized experience to enhance a child’s personality, idiosyncratic talents and sense of self” (p. 469). Hence, homeschooling offers parents the opportunity to establish a specialized educational program that is intended to match the particular needs and interests of a child. Parental belief in their own ability and effectiveness to help their children learn at home is an important factor in all of this (Green & Hoover-Dempsey 2007). Parents may also choose to homeschool due to a child’s special needs, whether it be it a learning disability, a medical or psychological condition, or giftedness (Morton, 2010; Rothermel, 2011). Oftentimes, families choosing the homeschooling option on account of their child’s special learning needs, “do so only as a last resort out of frustration with their child’s treatment by the school system” (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020, p. 265). Hence, these homeschoolers are motivated not by beliefs or values but by the unique learning needs of their children (Jolly & Matthews, 2018; Morton, 2010; Neuman & Guterman, 2019).

Dissatisfaction with Traditional Schools

Relatedly, some parents choose to educate their children at home because they are dissatisfied with the environment in traditional schools. In 2012, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the United States determined that the primary motivators for homeschooling were concerns about the school environment (25 per cent), religious or moral factors (21 per cent), and academic concerns (19 per cent) (Noel et al., 2016). Parental discontent about the school environment can take on many forms. Concerns for child safety and wellbeing, bullying, and harmful peer pressures like drugs, alcohol, premarital sex, and consumerism can motivate parents to home school (Arai, 2000; Aurini & Davies, 2005). In a study by Gray & Riley (2013), a large proportion of unstructured homeschooling parents “referred specifically to the rigidity of the school’s rules or the authoritarian nature of the classroom as reason for removing the child” (p. 9). Commenting on the situation in Ontario, Aurini & Davies (2005) claim that “many embrace homeschooling *in reaction* to recent reforms that can be characterized as neo-liberal, such as Ontario’s initiatives for standardized tests, tougher standards, ‘league tables’ and other rating and accountability schemes” (p. 466). Oftentimes, parents that choose to homeschool do so because they themselves had negative experiences in the schooling system, causing them to view such institutions more adversely compared to the general population (Arai, 2000; Gray & Riley, 2013; Neuman, 2019). Documenting the parental motivations of Black homeschooling families in the United States, Mazama and Musumunu (2015) found that parents were motivated to spare their children from racist experiences in schools (including low expectations, over-diagnosis of special needs, and physical safety concerns), and instead, provide Afrocentric curriculum and positive learning experiences through homeschooling. In turn, homeschoolers often choose this alternative educational practice in order to withdraw their children from schools due to undesirable or concerning situations.

Maintenance of the Family Unit

Home education programs attract parents that may also view it as a way to strengthen family bonds (Brabant et al., 2003; Spiegler, 2010). It is believed to offer families the opportunity to develop closer and stronger parent-child relationships (Basham, Merrifield & Hepburn, 2007). For some families, homeschooling is viewed as a “family educational project” (Brabant et al., 2003). Similarly, it has been noted in the literature that “home educators often choose to homeschool because they want the family to be the premier socialization agent” (Pannone, 2017, p. 11). In a study conducted by Green & Hoover-Dempsey (2007) it was found that “parents appear to decide to homeschool not so much because they believe that public schools cannot educate their children but because they believe that they are personally responsible for their child’s education and they are capable of educating their children well in ways consistent with their priorities” (p. 278). The decision to educate children at home, therefore, is often motivated by feelings of parental responsibility and the desire to strengthen family connections.

Situational Pragmatics

Beyond the motivating factors already listed, researchers have pointed out that an increasingly diverse range of families choose to home educate their children for pragmatic reasons. This has led Gaither (2009) to conclude that:

...as homeschooling has become less controversial and more familiar, more and more people, all kinds of people, are turning to it as an option for their children ... more and more people are choosing this path not out of frustration with secularism or numbing bureaucracy or inflexible curriculum or age segregation but simply because it makes sense for the time being given family circumstances ... using the home to educate for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. (2009, p. 342)

Gaither (2009) identifies at least three practical circumstances where families may choose home education. These include: families with children involved in time-intensive activities such as sports, music, or drama/acting; families with children who have special needs, whether it be learning or health-related; and families who “integrate education into the telecommuting, globetrotting lives they lead” (Gaither, 2009, p. 343). In such cases, families that choose to educate their families at home are making a pragmatic decision based on their life situation. Contextual variables including the amount of time, energy, knowledge, and skills also influence the parent’s perception regarding the feasibility of homeschooling.

In some areas, including remote Northern communities in Alberta, homeschooling at times has been the only route for families due to limited schooling options. With the development of information and broadband technologies, distance and online education have become more readily available to families living in remote areas. In turn, both location and technology are motivating factors that contribute to the practical reasons to homeschool.

Furthermore, the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted education systems worldwide since 2020 may also be considered a case of situational pragmatics that motivated parents to home educate. In the Alberta context, many school jurisdictions saw a sudden shift to home education programs in 2020-21 due to circumstances surrounding the pandemic, which led some parents to view homeschooling as a better option for their family rather than sending children back to school. This marks a unique situation in which parents made the decision to switch to home education in a new context of uncertainty, and for pragmatic reasons.

Homeschooler Outcomes

This section of the report discusses the impact of homeschooling in regards to academic achievement, socialization, and physical and mental health. The following discussion and analysis is based on a comprehensive review of the scholarly literature pertaining to homeschooler outcomes. However, there are a number of important considerations to keep in mind when discussing homeschooler outcomes. First, quite often homeschoolers have also been conventionally-schooled, or homeschoolers are really flexi-schooled. This makes it difficult to distinguish the impact of homeschooling from the impact of conventional schooling. Second, rigorous empirical research on the effects of homeschooling remains scarce. Much of the research lacks controls for family background that allow us to differentiate the treatment effect of homeschooling from other factors. Additionally, most of the research is drawn from samples that are non-representative of the homeschooling population, since participants are recruited or self-selected. Third, observers have pointed out that much of the research regarding the effects of homeschooling has been undertaken by homeschooling advocates or advocacy groups. There is therefore still a lot to be desired concerning our understanding of the cognitive, social, and health-related impacts of homeschooling.

Academic Achievement

Despite the lack of rigorous empirical studies, some reviewers maintain there is a positive correlation between homeschooling and academic performance. However, “even when children test well, we are unable to establish that the homeschooling intervention is responsible for the results” (Murphy, 2014, p. 254). This is because most studies on the effects of homeschooling do not control for family background variables—that is, they do not isolate the effect of homeschooling from other possible explanations for differences in test scores, such as family income, parental education, parental involvement, or any of other factor that may have an impact on the academic success of a child (Belfield, 2005; Lubienski, Puckett, & Brewer, 2013). In a study by Coleman (2014a) it was found that homeschooling families in Alaska with higher levels of household income scored higher on academic tests. In an earlier study by Medlin (1994), involving thirty-four homeschooling families, it was found that a significant positive relationship exists between a mother’s educational background and the academic success of their children. On the other hand, some research contends that homeschooling appears to “damp down the

negative effects” of low levels of household income and parental education on student performance (Murphy, 2014, p. 256).

Throughout the scholarly literature, however, it is consistently concluded that homeschooling does not have much of an effect on student achievement after controlling for family background variables (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020). Even some of the pro-homeschooling research has found no relationship between academic achievement and the number of years a child has been homeschooled (Ray & Wartes, 1991; Ray, 2010). In a well-designed study that controlled for family background variables, Belfield (2005) compared all the self-identified homeschoolers who completed the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) in the USA in 2001 with all the public and private school students that completed the SAT in the same year, and found that “there is not a large gap between the scores across school types” (Belfield, 2005, p. 174).

It should be noted, however, that a number of researchers have called into question the suitability of using mainstream methods of evaluation such as standardized tests to assess whether or not homeschooling is an effective educational strategy or not (Neuman & Guterman, 2016; Van Pelt, 2015). These authors contend that mainstream tests may not align with the goals of home education programs.

In Canada, a group of scholars investigated the differences between structured and unstructured homeschooling, and its impacts on student achievement. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011) designed a study that involved three different groups of students: structured homeschoolers, unstructured homeschoolers, and children attending public school. They found that the academic attainments of the structured homeschooling group were higher than those of the children attending regular school, and the academic attainments of the unstructured homeschooling group were lower than those of both other groups. Hence, the findings of this study “strongly suggest that the children who are being taught at home in a structured environment score significantly higher than the children receiving unstructured home schooling” (Martin-Chang et al, 2011, p. 200).

A consistent finding in the scholarly research is that homeschooling tends to improve student’s verbal skills and reduce math skills (Coleman, 2014b; Kunzman & Gaither, 2020; Quaqish, 2007). Observers have speculated that this may be because of “the conversational learning style common to homeschooling and the widely-observed phenomenon that homeschoolers often spend significant time being read to or reading [which] all contribute to their impressive verbal scores, while math is not given the same priority” (Kunzman and Gaither, 2020, p. 271). Similarly, Coleman (2014b) found that homeschoolers who went onto college or university were far less likely to major in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics-based disciplines.

On the topic of post-secondary outcomes, it is important to note that homeschooled students in Alberta that choose not to follow the Alberta *Programs of Study* may not apply for high school credits, and in turn, they may not receive a High School Diploma. In terms of recognized advanced academic achievement, the absence of diploma marks and transcripts can severely hinder one’s prospects since they are the main tools that colleges and universities use to evaluate admission.

However, any student in a home education program in Alberta may write (or challenge) a high school diploma examination. But, to receive a final course mark, a home education student must also have a school-awarded mark submitted by the supervising school authority (demonstrating use of Alberta *Programs of Study*), in addition to a diploma examination mark. Therefore, homeschooled students in Alberta that do not follow the provincial curriculum may encounter difficulties when transitioning to post-secondary education. (Post-secondary rates among homeschooled students are not available in Alberta.)

The results of the Cardus Education Surveys (which are long-term studies involving homeschool students obtained via random sampling) suggests that “homeschoolers as a whole do not have great educational and economic success if measured by conventional standards like a college degree and a high-paying job” (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020: 275). Still, researchers have pointed out that homeschooling families might not be motivated, nor define success, by such conventional standards (Gray & Riley, 2013; Guterman & Neuman, 2016). Other researchers have found no difference in student retention, performance, and graduation rates when comparing college students who were homeschooled and those who attended traditional schools (Cogan, 2010; Jones & Gloeckner, 2004; Saunders, 2010; Yu, Sackett & Kuncel, 2016).

Ultimately, the research findings most consistently show that homeschooling does not have much of an impact on student achievement once family variables are controlled for, notwithstanding the differences in verbal skills and mathematics, and the differences between structured and unstructured homeschooling.

Socialization

The socialization of homeschooled children has received widespread attention among observers. The idea of socialization implies “how and to what extent diverse individuals are meshed with the requirements of collective life” (Long & Hadden, 1985, p. 39). It refers to the process by which young people acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable them to function in the society in which they live. It also refers to how and what extent young people develop beliefs, values, and convictions that are important to them and why. The school is considered “not only an institution of learning but also a central pillar in the socialization of children” (Guterman & Neuman, 2017, p. 779).

However, when children do not attend school, they may be deprived of important opportunities to develop social skills, values, and responsibilities (Medlin, 2000; Reich 2002). Consequently, a common criticism of homeschooling is that it does not allow for the same type of social opportunities, interactions, and activities that children experience at schools, which in turn, can negatively impact their social development (Stevens, 2001). For some scholars, homeschooling represents an extreme form of a broader shift toward educational privatization since it represents a retreat from the public sphere, students lack exposure to cultural and ethical diversity, and learning is predicated on individualistic needs and wants rather than collective

action, social responsibility, and democratic citizenship (Apple 2000; Lubienski, 2000; Ross, 2010; Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Reich, 2002; West 2009).

Not surprisingly, homeschooling parents and advocates disagree with the criticisms mentioned above. Instead, they question whether institutionalized schooling is properly setup to provide a more desirable form of socialization due to the perceived prevalence of conformity and moral degradation (Medlin, 2000). Research shows that parents who choose to educate their children at home generally believe they are providing a better form of socialization (Kunzman & Gaither, 2020; Medlin, 2013). The family context is considered the natural setting for the socialization of children (AHEA, 2021a). In addition to family interactions, the socialization of homeschooled children occurs through learning cooperatives, extracurricular activities, and other engagements that take place outside of the home. Indeed, most homeschooling families report frequent participation in activities outside of the home, including religious, sporting, extracurricular, cocurricular, volunteer, work, and other social activities that provide opportunities for group interaction (Murphy, 2014).

In their extensive review of scholarly literature regarding the socialization of homeschoolers, Kunzman & Gaither (2020) summarized that “homeschoolers do not seem to suffer in comparison with their conventionally-schooled counterparts across a range of social skills” (p. 277). In fact, Knowles and Muchmore (1995) suggest that homeschooling may actually cultivate a stronger sense of independence and self-determination among learners. However, as is the case with most of the homeschooling research, these studies suffer from methodological limitations, including small, non-representative samples based on self-reporting.

Yet, a common theme in the research is the finding that homeschoolers suffer from greater social isolation compared to those who are conventionally-schooled (Guterman & Neuman, 2017; Pearlman-Avni & Grayevsky, 2017). Consistently, public school-goers are found to have more close contacts within their social network than homeschoolers who are typically limited to spending the majority of their time with siblings and parents (Allie-Carson, 1990; Catham-Carpenter, 1994). Homeschoolers with more peer interactions have performed better on socialization measures than homeschoolers with fewer peer interactions (Guterman & Neuman, 2017; Kunzman & Gaither, 2020; Pearlman-Avni & Grayevsky, 2017). Scholars such as Buss (2000) have pointed out that children and youth require exposure to ideologically-diverse peers to help facilitate the process of identity development, and she argues specifically that religiously-based homeschooling may inhibit such development (see also Blokhuis, 2010; Dwyer & Peters, 2019; Fineman & Shepherd, 2016; West, 2009). Indeed, a number of scholars have argued that religiously-inspired homeschooling may be obstructing self-autonomy and independence, since parents can function as the sole educator and restrict access to a variety of ideas and perspectives (Blokhuis, 2010; Dwyer & Peters, 2019; West, 2009).

Given the wide discrepancy of homeschooling programs, practices, and activities it seems reasonable to conclude that homeschooler outcomes, in terms of socialization, are highly dependent upon the extent to which opportunities are provided for social interaction and contact with diverse ideas. In general, homeschooling does not appear to harm the development of social

skills and competencies, so long as homeschooled youth are offered ample opportunities for group socialization to develop their own social values and put those skills into practice.

Physical and Mental Health

In the past decade, more attention has been given to studying the physical and mental health of homeschoolers. Without the same level of health care screening typically conducted in school settings (including formal and informal, physical and mental), some researchers have begun to ask questions about the correlation between homeschooling and its impacts on student health. Take, for example, the issue of immunizations. In a large-scale American study of parents with school-aged children, it was found that parents who homeschooled were significantly less inclined to support immunizations for their children because of distrust and/or safety concerns (Kennedy & Gust, 2005). Moreover, it was found in California that “vaccine-hesitant parents considered homeschooling as a way to avoid immunization” in schools (Mohanty, Joyce, Delamater, Klein, Slamon, Omer & Bittenheim, 2020, p. 1900). In the U.S., education professionals are also responsible for reporting more than one-fifth of all cases of child maltreatment submitted to child protective services (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2020). Hence, there is a general concern that homeschooled children, in some cases, may lack opportunities to access certain health care protection and provisions. In the case of unsupervised home education, there is even less opportunities for professionals to monitor the safety of children.

The most controversial issue when discussing the health of homeschoolers relates to concerns about child abuse. In a report conducted in Wales that extensively analyzed the risks associated with homeschooling it was determined that “home education significantly reduces professional access and child safety monitoring opportunities” that may enable parents to hide abuse or neglect (Forrester, Maxwell, Slater, & Doughty, 2017). However, the authors of this report also claim they have no reason to believe that abuse is any more – or less – common among homeschoolers compared to the general population. In a study of six school districts in Connecticut, it was determined that 36% of the families who removed their children to homeschool (between the years 2013 to 2016) had at least one and frequently multiple reports of suspected child abuse or neglect (Office of Child Advocate, 2018). In another study it was found that 47% of severe child abuse cases documented at a limited number of medical institutions in Virginia, Texas, Wisconsin, Utah, and Washington State had been children that were removed from school under the auspice of “homeschooling” (Knox, Starling, Feldman, Kellogg, Frasier & Tiapula, 2014). Furthermore, based on their assessment of publicly available data in the U.S., the Coalition for Responsible Home Education (CRHE) asserts that “homeschooled children are at a greater risk of dying from child abuse than are traditionally schooled children”—a problem they refer to as homeschooling’s “invisible children” (CRHE, 2021). Hence, there are a number of studies that indicate that homeschooling can be used as a method to conceal abuse or neglect. While most of these studies were conducted in the United States, their lessons are still applicable to the Alberta context. That is, home education programs ought to require some degree of professional supervision to protect children from abuse, neglect, or any other form of parental

or guardian mistreatment. Homeschooling that is not supervised offers no protection or security for children that are at-risk of abuse or neglect.

Some researchers have compared the physical activity and fitness levels of homeschooled students to regular school students. Generally, these studies suggest no statistically significant differences in terms of diet or exercise, motor skills, risk of cardiovascular disease, endurance, or muscular strength (Kabiri, Mitchell, Brewer, & Ortiz, 2017, 2018; Kabiri, Butcher, Brewer, & Ortiz, 2019; Long, Gaetke, Perry, Abel, & Clasey, 2010). Less clear is the data concerning the emotional wellbeing of homeschoolers. In their study, Guterman & Neuman (2016) found that homeschooling children had lower levels of depression and were less likely to display emotional and behavioural problems compared to regular school-goers. However, this study is based on a small convenience sample only, so these findings cannot be generalized to represent the wider homeschooling population.

Homeschooling in Alberta: Regulations, Funding, and Fiscal Impact

In all Canadian provinces homeschooling is recognized as a viable option that fulfills the requirements of compulsory school attendance. Homeschooled students are required by law to be registered with a local or provincial school authority, however, beyond this basic requirement the regulations differ across Canada in terms of the level of monitoring and accountability required. Home education programs in Alberta are provided in accordance with the *Education Act* and *Home Education Regulation*.

Studying homeschool regulations across the globe, Donnelly (2012) has classified them according to four categories: no regulation, low regulation, moderate regulation, and high regulation. Jurisdictions with “no regulation” do not require a parent to notify a governing authority when homeschooling. Jurisdictions with “low regulation” require a parent to notify an authority and give minimal information. Jurisdictions with “moderate regulation” require parents to notify authorities and fulfil a number of requirements such as routine evaluations, tracking performance, and other reporting. “High regulation” jurisdictions include the moderate regulation stipulations but also require parents to successfully apply for approval before commencing their homeschool program. Table 1 below provides a summary of homeschooling regulations across Canadian provinces that are classified as “low,” “moderate,” and “high” regulations.

Table 1: Classification of Homeschooling Regulations by Province	
<p>Low Regulations <i>Only require parents to notify school authorities and provide nominal information.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alberta (non-supervised option) • British Columbia • Ontario • New Brunswick • Newfoundland & Labrador

<p>Moderate Regulations <i>Require programs to be certified or inspected, the submission of an education program plan, and some reporting.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manitoba • Nova Scotia • Prince Edward Island
<p>High Regulations <i>Require an educational plan that is officially reviewed, program monitoring that is conducted by the registering school authority, student progress that is periodically reviewed and assessed, and a curriculum that follows provincial standards.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alberta (supervised option) • Saskatchewan • Quebec

Source: Donnelly (2012); Van Pelt (2015); updated by author.

In Alberta, there are both supervised and non-supervised home education programs, which entail “high” and “low” regulations, respectively. Both types of home education programs, however, can be terminated at any time. In the case of supervised homeschooling, the associate board or private school may determine that the “student is not making reasonable progress” in the predetermined list of activities or “in achieving the applicable outcomes” or the parent providing the supervised home education program has not met the obligations of the *Home Education Regulation (Education Act, 2020, p. 8)*. In the case of non-supervised homeschooling, an investigation may occur if there is reason to believe that a particular home education program is not provided in accordance with the *Home Education Regulation* or “does not provide a reasonable opportunity for the student to achieve the applicable outcomes” (*Education Act, 2020, p. 3*). If following an investigation a home education program is deemed unsatisfactory, the program may be terminated.

Supervised home education programs are eligible to receive Alberta Education funding on account of the administrative duties and responsibilities of both the homeschooling family and a supervising school authority. The Government of Alberta provides a \$1,700 grant (divided evenly between families and school authorities) for each student registered in a supervised home education program. By contrast, a parent or guardian who chooses to provide a home education program that is not supervised by a school authority – and thus, without any administrative direction or oversight – is not eligible for Alberta Education funding.

Saskatchewan is the only other province that provides funding for its homeschooled students and families. In Alberta, families opting for supervised homeschooling receive 50% of the home education grant (which equals \$850 annually per student). In Saskatchewan, the subsidies available to families that offer homeschooling varies by school district. Registered homeschool parents in the two largest school districts (Saskatoon Public Schools and Regina Public Schools) are eligible to receive up to \$1,000 per homeschooled student (Saskatoon) and \$800 per elementary student and \$550 per high school student (Regina) (Regina Public Schools, 2021; Van Pelt, 2015). There seems to be a correlation between funding for homeschooling and homeschooling enrolments, as Alberta and Saskatchewan report the highest percentage of homeschooled students (1.8% and 1.3% respectively; based on 2019 figures).

In 2019-20, Alberta Education disbursed more than \$23 million to offset the costs of supervised homeschooling (spending \$1,700 per student via the home education grant). The bulk of the costs, however, associated with homeschooling are covered by parents, which is believed to result in net financial savings for the provincial government. With Alberta's homeschool student population in 2019-20 being 13,588 and provincial spending on K to 12 estimated to be \$11,121 per student, this amounts to a net savings of more than \$127 million. The amount of net savings from homeschooling can also be calculated as a percentage of total government spending on K to 12 education, which equals an estimated 1.5%.

While proponents suggest that homeschooling is a way to save taxpayers money since children are withdrawn from publicly-funded schools (Belfield 2005; Ray & Weller, 2003), there are hidden costs associated with homeschooling that could lessen any potential net gain. The real costs of homeschooling fall on the backs of homeschooling families who are required to forgo the income of one parent (typically the mother) who must remain at home (Stevens, 2001). Correspondingly, the cost of tax revenue missed because homeschooling parents choose not to participate in the paid labour market, but rather stay at home to educate their children, could be substantial (Murphy, 2014). It also has the potential to limit the careers of mothers who do stay at home for schooling purposes (Aurini & Davies, 2005) Hence, the fiscal impact of homeschooling must be viewed more-systematically than simply reducing it to the costs of home education grants. As there are obscured financial impacts associated with each family that decides to educate their children at home.

Conclusion

Over the past four decades, homeschooling has steadily grown in Alberta from an unconventional approach to K-12 education to a program of choice enshrined in the *Education Act*. Alberta is home to more than one-third of all homeschooled students in Canada, and there are about as many homeschooled students in the province as there are students enrolled in Francophone and charter schools combined. The number of homeschooled students nearly doubled in 2020-21 in response to Covid-19, and it is yet to be seen if that shift will continue or not. Certainly, the opportunities that ICT and broadband technology continue to offer are reinventing possibilities for education to occur that are less hindered by constraints of time and space, which will continue to facilitate demands for homeschooling. At the same time, provincial laws have also been loosened in Alberta in order to further liberalize the homeschooling sector.

Since September 2020, parents in Alberta opting to educate their children at home have had the choice to do so without a school authority's supervision. This legislative change was intended to give parents more choice and control to homeschool their children outside the purview of any external authority. Yet, it is clearly not in the best interests of students to allow parents to fully control all aspects of their child's learning without any level of professional educational

supervision involved. Home education that is not supervised removes any opportunity for professional teachers – who receive specialized training and must meet provincial quality standards – to monitor, assess, and support the learning of these students. It also eliminates the opportunity to monitor the safety of these children in an effort to reduce the risks of child maltreatment. Moreover, home education that is not supervised by a school authority is less likely to follow the provincial curriculum – whether it be because of distrust in the prevailing system or the absence of accountability measures in place – which can result in learners that lack exposure to a variety of perspectives and important bodies of knowledge. Additionally, homeschooled students in Alberta that do not follow the provincial curriculum may encounter difficulties when transitioning to post-secondary education. To ensure a certain degree of quality, equity, and equality of opportunity in Alberta’s K-12 education system, high regulatory standards should therefore be a top priority for home education programs and systems in Alberta.

In fact, rather than loosen regulations, the regulatory standards pertaining to home education programs in Alberta should be further strengthened to provide an exemplar for other jurisdictions. Based on the findings of this research, it is the recommendation of this report that **(1) all home education programs in Alberta be supervised by an accredited school authority**, as was previously mandated. However, this report has also documented the way in which third-party contractors have been used by private school authorities to supervise wide-scale home education programs throughout the province, which raises a number of issues related to public accountability, transparency, and authorization. In turn, this report further recommends that **(2) third-party contractors should not be permitted to supervise home education programs because they are not registered or accredited by the provincial government**. To further bolster homeschooling regulations in Alberta, the province should also consider a policy of “prequalification,” as pointed out by Dwyer & Peters (2019), in which case, parents would have to demonstrate to a school authority that they have successfully educated their child previously via “home pre-schooling” or “home summer schooling” as a prerequisite to establish a home education program.

The regulatory standards, student population, and development of homeschooling practices and programs in Alberta should not be overlooked by decision-makers, school officials, professionals, parents, and/or engaged citizens. Especially, while parental choice is prioritized over public education, and the highest standards of educational quality, equity, and innovation remain top of mind.

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