

COVID-19 and the End of Government Schooling's Main Value Proposition

In mid-2020, I mused that if the COVID-19 pandemic ended up producing any silver linings, the most likely bright spot would be its impact on government — so-called “public” — education. Throughout the previous spring, government schools had largely shut down in-person classes, switching to ad hoc and, it seems, fairly lame, “remote learning.”

Some besieged, bedraggled parents held out hope for an autumn return to the previous normalcy. Others looked at the “remote learning” setup and decided they (perhaps in cooperation with other parents) could do a better job themselves — if not permanently, at least until the emergency was over.

By the fall 2020 semester, according to the US Census, the percentage of homeschooling households in America had doubled, from 5.4% of households to 11.1%.

That may have been just the beginning of a long-term trend.

Parents choose government schooling versus homeschooling or vice versa for many reasons, not all of them related to the overall better academic achievement (15-30% better performance on standardized tests, for example) homeschooling boasts.

One BIG reason is financial. In an age when nearly every parent works (regardless of whether the family is single- or multi-parent), homeschooling can mean significant loss of income. At least one parent has to be home to teach, rather than on an outside job.

The value proposition government schooling offers is: “Sure, we do a fairly crappy job of teaching your kids to read, write, and do arithmetic ... but hey, who turns down free daycare?”

The pandemic threw a wrench into that value proposition. Suddenly, the kids weren't disappearing on a yellow bus each morning, leaving Mom and/or Dad available to work a shift and earn a paycheck.

With “remote learning,” many parents had to either quit jobs or invest significant portions of their income in daycare. Some of them decided to turn “remote learning” lemons into homeschooling lemonade.

Others muddled through as best they could, waiting for that return to normalcy (or homeschooled in the interim with plans to send their kids back to government schools when possible). Because, after all, emergencies don't last forever, right?

Now it's January of 2022 and another problem with that financial equation, and with the government school value proposition, is rearing its ugly head: Reliability.

Parents who made the best of a bad situation while holding out hope that the government schools would get their act together Real Soon Now find themselves caught in a new cycle of alternating expectation and disappointment as we come up on "700 days to slow the spread."

Will the government schools be in session this week? How about next week? And the week after that? Who knows?

Those parents can't assure current or prospective employers that they'll be available to work next week, or the week after, or the week after that.

They're caught in the same "quit my job or fork over for daycare" trap they've spent the last two years in, with the added irritant of nearly daily uncertainty.

And many more of them are almost certainly eyeing the homeschooling exits.