

Gallup Poll: Homeschooling Rate Doubles as School Satisfaction Plummets

Results of a new Gallup poll released last week may give us the sharpest look yet at how the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted American education and what may lie ahead. According to the poll, parents' overall satisfaction with their child's education dropped 10 percent over last year, while at the same time the number of parents saying they will choose homeschooling doubled in 2020 to 10 percent.

Throughout the summer, parents have expressed their frustration with back-to-school plans, including disappointment over continued remote learning and strict social distancing requirements. Homeschooling registrations soared across the country, and many families began to spontaneously organize "pandemic pods" to offer small group learning and social interaction for their children. Opting out of conventional schooling this fall for homeschooling or "podding" has become not only acceptable but widely embraced.

Indeed, the new Gallup poll found that attendance in public schools, while still most common, declined 7 percent in 2020 to 76 percent of US K-12 children, indicating that more parents are seeking alternatives to their assigned district school. Many of these parents are choosing homeschooling for this academic year, which Gallup defines as "not enrolled in a formal school, but taught at home." This wording clarification is significant in distinguishing between children who are learning at home while enrolled in a public, private, or virtual school, and children who are being independently homeschooled.

The rise in homeschooling this year is likely being accelerated by the creation of collaborative learning pods that make homeschooling easier for parents and profitable for teachers. As teachers' unions stymie reopening plans, and court battles ensue, the free market has been quick to respond to parental demand, bypassing the bureaucratic back-to-school mayhem and offering valuable solutions.

Entrepreneurs like Sarah Kurtz McKinnon have stepped in to facilitate pod-building and expand schooling alternatives. The founder of Pod School Prep, Kurtz McKinnon is a long-time summer camp director and camp counselor trainer who recognized the rapid growth of pods and wanted to help train facilitators to lead pod programs.

"As schools across the country moved to virtual models, I quickly recognized that there was going to be a childcare crisis," Kurtz McKinnon told me in a recent interview. "I saw immediate discussions in Facebook groups about the idea of 'pods' and thought that camp-counselor type people would be excellent candidates to lead pods, but training is necessary."

In addition to targeting podding parents who want trained facilitators, Kurtz McKinnon and her startup team are also partnering with organizations such as the YMCA that are providing alternative learning spaces this fall. In Virginia, for example, the YMCA recently announced all-day in-person programming for children whose public schools pursue remote learning plans.

“Across the country, many families and educators are getting forced into a new educational model. It’s a big experiment and it’s happening rapidly!” said Kurtz McKinnon. “We want parents, educators, and students to be inspired by the possibilities that pod learning presents and use this knowledge to make education as we know it even better.”

The increased openness to pod learning and homeschooling this year, along with a greater emphasis on school choice mechanisms to expand learning options to more families, will likely continue to disrupt and reshape American education during and after the pandemic.

Now that parents have gained a closer look at what their children are learning (or not learning) in school, and feel more empowered to help guide their education, they will not so quickly hand back the reins to bureaucrats and educationists.

Parents are positioned to be a driving force in advancing education choice and innovation, while entrepreneurs respond with new learning models that suit the 21st century far better than the current 19th-century prototype.

The virus and related lockdowns have created serious educational challenges for families, but as the Gallup poll suggests, they may have also exposed parents to new possibilities for education beyond traditional schooling. Now, more parents may feel emboldened to advocate for new and better learning options for all children.