

More Charter Schools Translates to Fewer Homeschoolers, Study Says

It's hard to compete with free. More charter schools in a given area could reduce the number of homeschoolers, new research finds. In their study published this month in the *Peabody Journal of Education*, scholars Corey DeAngelis and Angela Dills looked at the impact of school choice options on parents' homeschooling decisions. They found that homeschooling rates decline after charter school laws are passed in a given state, particularly the longer those laws are in place.

Opportunity Cost in Action

Parents want more education choice, and mechanisms that lower the cost of alternatives to one's assigned district school are sought-after. Even though many families homeschool on a budget and more parents work and homeschool, there can be both real costs and opportunity costs to homeschooling. DeAngelis told me in a recent interview:

These are the first empirical findings on the subject, so we definitely need to research the topic further. However, our results tend to suggest that expansion of charter schools decreases homeschool market share by enticing homeschool families to switch to the "free" option.

It makes sense that the prevalence of free public charter school options may encourage families to choose a charter school over homeschool. The top motivator for today's homeschooling families is "concern about the school environment, such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure." A nearby charter school gives parents the choice of a different school environment at no additional cost, with homeschooling taking a back seat.

DeAngelis and Dills also explored the impact of voucher programs on homeschooling rates. Could voucher programs lead to more homeschoolers if vouchers were available to homeschooling families, thereby reducing homeschooling costs? Or would voucher programs decrease the cost of private schools and prompt more homeschooling families to enroll their children in a private school? Additionally, might a voucher program act as "Trojan Horse," inviting more government regulation of private schools that accept voucher money and therefore leading more families toward the freedom of homeschooling?

Choice Is Choice

The researchers found that unlike charter schools that can lower homeschooling rates, the results from vouchers are less clear. Their analysis revealed either statistically insignificant outcomes of vouchers on homeschooling prevalence or slight decreases in homeschooling once the voucher program was in place for a while. According to DeAngelis and Dills, Liberating more parents and children from a mandatory district school assignment is a positive step toward educational freedom for all. “The mixed results for vouchers may be a result of private schools moving away from supporting homeschooling in the wake of the adoption of a voucher program.”

While homeschooling proponents might lament the potential decline in homeschooling rates when charter schools become more abundant or when voucher programs are around for a few years, the overall trend toward more parental choice in education is something to celebrate.

Liberating more parents and children from a mandatory district school assignment is a positive step toward educational freedom for all. Still, DeAngelis adds that “homeschool families should consider the loss of educational freedom when switching to public charter schools,” and they should generally support Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) over charter school expansion.

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