



Preserving Family Freedom from Government Overreach

A lecture delivered May 1, 2020 at “The Disinformation Campaign Against Homeschooling” conference hosted by Ideological Diversity, a student organization at Harvard Kennedy School

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by Kerry McDonald

Thank you, Cevin, and thank you to the Ideological Diversity student group and the Harvard Kennedy School for sponsoring this important event. I am honored to be joined by such an esteemed group of panelists to highlight the disinformation campaign against homeschooling.

As a Harvard alumna, education researcher, and, most importantly, a homeschooling mother of four children right here in Cambridge, Massachusetts—just down the road from Harvard's main campus—I was, like many of you, appalled when I read the recent *Harvard Magazine* [article](#) against homeschooling that was based on Harvard Law School Professor Elizabeth Bartholet's lengthy [paper](#) in the *Arizona Law Review* calling for a presumptive ban on homeschooling. I wrote a letter to the editor of *Harvard Magazine* expressing my disappointment with the magazine's inaccurate and one-sided portrayal of homeschooling that is not at all reflective of 21st century homeschooling, and I also [published that letter](#) at FEE.org where it's been widely shared.

Professor Bartholet tries to say that homeschooling should be banned because homeschooled children are not in school and could be abused by their families, but in my work I get emails and message all the time from families who are choosing homeschooling to escape widespread abuse in public schools.

Maybe their child has been bullied and endured persistent peer abuse, both physical and emotional. Sometimes these children are abused by their teachers and other school officials. Newspaper headlines regularly [expose](#) how various public school teachers have been arrested and convicted for abuse against their students. Corey DeAngelis will share more statistics, but a 2004 US Department of Education [study](#) found that 1 in 10 students will experience sexual abuse by a public school educator by the time they graduate from high school. Tragically, child abuse happens everywhere, but homeschooling is the exit ramp for many loving families to protect their children from the harm they endure in public schools.

Bartholet and others make it seem that home is the prison and school is the liberator, (as the *Harvard Magazine* article illustration tried to show), when for many children (as Cevin Soling

reveals in his award-winning 2009 documentary, [The War on Kids](#)), school is most certainly the prison where they are trapped inside a compulsory classroom. Homeschooling can be the relief.

While some of the homeschooling families I talk to are fleeing abusive schooling environments, others simply desire a different learning environment for their children outside of a conventional classroom. Maybe their children are bored at school, are unchallenged, and the parents want to provide a more rigorous academic environment. Maybe they are a family of “worldschoolers,” traveling regularly for work or leisure, and becoming immersed in cultures around the globe. Maybe their children are energetic and exuberant and have a hard time sitting still in a conventional classroom. Many homeschooling parents want to help retain their child’s natural creativity and curiosity rather than having it crushed by a system of mass schooling that demands conformity and compliance.

Homeschooling is legal in all 50 US states and has been since the mid-1990s, but now that right, that exit ramp, is under attack, with calls for a national ban on the practice, or at the very least heavy regulation to force homeschooling to look like public school at home.

One of the more concerning characteristics of both the Arizona Law Review paper and the related *Harvard Magazine* article is the anti-religion sentiment, and in particular, the palpable disdain for conservative Christian beliefs and values. Look, I’m not at all religious but I find it deeply concerning when individuals and families are persecuted for their religious beliefs or values. This bias against religious and conservative families is particularly strange when Bartholet herself [indicates](#) that one of her reasons for wanting to ban homeschooling is to make sure that children grow up with “tolerance of other people’s viewpoints,” and yet her piece is so *intolerant* toward those who don’t think or live like she does.

Twice in her Arizona Law Review article and again in the *Harvard Magazine* piece, Bartholet says that up to 90% of today’s homeschoolers are “driven by conservative Christian beliefs.” To which I would say, first, that’s not true, but second even if it were true, so what? Why would that matter? Why would it matter if 90% of today’s homeschoolers are driven by atheist beliefs? Why would it matter if 90% of today’s homeschoolers are driven by Buddhist beliefs? This should not be a justification for increased oversight and suspicion of a particular group.

That said, reliable data show that about [two-thirds](#) of US homeschooling families identify as Christian, which is equal to the US population as a whole, with about two-thirds of Americans identifying as Christian according to the [Pew Research Center](#). But even if homeschooling families identify as Christian, most are not choosing to homeschool for religious reasons. According to the most recent [data](#) from the US Department of Education, a top motivator for today’s homeschooling families and the one cited most frequently in recent surveys is: “concern about the environment of other schools, including safety, drugs, and negative peer pressure.”

Moreover, much of the recent growth in the US homeschool population over the past decade has come from [urban, secular](#) families – like mine—who want more freedom and flexibility for our children’s learning

I first became interested in homeschooling, alternatives to school, and education choice back in college and graduate school about 20 years ago, but it was when I became I mom and was looking at education options for my own children that I discovered the real joy of homeschooling.

I realized that if I sent my children to school their learning would contract. They would go to the same building everyday with the same age-segregated group of peers and the same static handful of teachers doing the same standardized curriculum. Instead, I wanted my children to be fully and authentically immersed in our community, taking classes offered through our local museums, libraries, nature centers, makerspaces; building relationships with local shopkeepers who offer programming and mentorship; and getting tutoring and guidance from experts in their fields. I wanted them to be free to learn, following their interests and talents, and not holed up in a compulsory school classroom.

Recent [research](#) on homeschoolers by Daniel Hamlin at the University of Oklahoma reveals that homeschoolers are immersed in their communities and have high levels of what he calls “cultural capital,” as they frequently visit libraries, museums, and cultural events—in some instances more frequently than their schooled peers.

I’ll wrap up by saying that this is about much more than homeschooling. Homeschooling is the strawman in a much larger, more pernicious effort to remake American society and in particular to reinterpret the US Constitution and the ways in which it has preserved the “liberty of interest of parents” to raise and educate their children as they choose.

In her Arizona Law Review [article](#), Bartholet calls the US Constitution “outdated and inadequate” and advocates for a reinterpretation of the Constitution that moves from its historic model of “negative rights,” or of individuals being free from state intrusion, to “positive rights,” in which the state grants rights and takes a more interventionist role in American life—in particular in the lives of families and children.

Bartholet looks to Germany (where homeschooling is illegal) as the model for the US to follow in imposing a ban on homeschooling. I find this to be one of the most troubling recommendations in Bartholet’s piece. The German prohibition against homeschooling dates back to [1938 and the Nazi regime](#) and an effort to subordinate the individual to the powers of the state.

Let’s not act like Germany. Let’s act like America.

Kerry McDonald is a senior education fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education, adjunct scholar at the Cato Institute, and author of *Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom* (Chicago Review Press, 2019). Follow her work at fee.org/kerry and on Twitter [@kerry_edu](https://twitter.com/kerry_edu).