



# A Quick History of Homeschooling and the Rise of Self-Directed Education

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

Working Paper No. 05-2020



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*Editor's Note: This address was presented during a livestream event hosted by the Harvard Kennedy School titled: "The Disinformation Campaign Against Homeschooling" on 1 May 2020*

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# A Quick History of Homeschooling and the Rise of Self-Directed Education

by Patrick Farenga

Good afternoon. I'm Patrick Farenga, author and publisher of books and articles about how children learn outside of school and the president of JohnHoltGWS. GWS stands for Growing Without Schooling, the magazine John Holt founded in 1977 and that I published until it ceased in 2001. I've worked in the homeschooling movement since 1981 and, with my wife, homeschooled our three daughters.

The Covid-19 pandemic is a time of isolation and introspection for us as individuals and as a nation. However, the closing of our schools has added a new pressure to our lives: parents must administer daily school lessons to their children while they are also figuring out how to work from home or how to cope with their loss of work. The schools, like everyone, were caught off guard by the pandemic and teachers are repurposing their daily lessons for the internet. But not everyone has internet access, lessons made for the classroom don't easily convert to web-based instruction, and few parents appear to have the patience or knowledge to help their children with their school assignments. This situation is further exacerbated by schools and the media referring to this as homeschooling, which it is not. People who choose to homeschool do so after they give careful thought to how they are going to work and live together as a family. What is occurring is remote learning and crisis schooling, not homeschooling.

Not all children learn in school despite the best efforts of good teachers. The author John Holt pondered this at length during his years as a fifth-grade teacher and in his first book, *How Children Fail*. Holt noticed that not only did the poor students not learn, but the good students often didn't really learn either. Holt called this process a "charade of learning" that occurs even in the best schools. Holt wrote, "The only difference between a good student and a bad student is the good one is careful not to forget what they studied until after the test." Today, more evidence of this is provided by the number of adults scouring the internet to relearn how to multiply fractions, properly spell words, or diagram sentences to teach their children at home. Learning is context sensitive, and if it is perceived as useless or unpleasant by the learner, it is unlikely that learning will remain in their minds.

Like many other school reformers, past and present, Holt urged smaller schools and classes, more diverse teachers and subject matter, encouragement of interdisciplinary thinking, and

plenty of free play for children. But the grind of industrial education pulverizes these options as too costly or too romantic.

After seeing how his and other's efforts at school reform in the 1960s were not well received by educators, Holt came to the idea that parents could use their homes as a base for their children's learning. Using their personal contacts and community resources, homeschooling parents act as general contractors for their children's learning, not the sole instructor. Today, with the internet and other media, there are even more opportunities for locating such help.

Holt didn't like the word "homeschooling" because the learning he was talking about didn't have to take place at home nor follow school curricula. He coined the term "unschooling" to describe this way of learning. Holt felt schools and homeschoolers could cooperate for each other's benefit and that schools could learn a lot about how children learn by observing and working with homeschoolers.

Homeschoolers have seen their eclectic approach help their children find work, contribute to society, and get into and graduate from college if that's their goal. Homeschoolers with very unconventional educations have gotten into higher education, including Harvard and other Ivy League schools.

As homeschooling gained adherents and publicity throughout the late 1970s, schools and their supporters actively pushed back to make homeschooling illegal. Homeschooling was not illegal in the US nor specifically legal, so Holt encouraged parents to stay out of court if possible. "I see no point in confronting the authorities if you can dodge them," Holt said. But he also advised homeschoolers to hold their ground if they do go to court. Based on state and supreme court rulings that support educational choice and parental rights Holt advised that parents "have the right to educate their children in whatever way they believe in; the state cannot impose on all parents any kind of educational monopoly of schools, methods, or whatever." (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925) and *Farrington v. Tokushige* (1927))

This interpretation was later upheld and expanded in a Massachusetts homeschooling court case in 1978. (*Perchemlides v. Frizzle*). Holt cites (*Teach Your Own*, p. 211) three more legal supports that are important for homeschoolers.

1. The state may not deprive parents of the right to educate their children as they see fit for arbitrary reasons, but only for serious educational ones, which it must make known to parents, with all the forms of due process. (*Perchemlides v. Frizzle* and *Michigan v. Nobel* (1979))
2. A state that would deny parents these rights for arbitrary reasons by saying that their home education plan is inadequate has a burden of proof to show beyond a reasonable doubt that this is so. Parents are assumed to be competent to teach their children until proved otherwise. This Assumption of Competence is kin to and part of the general Assumption of Innocence (of the accused) which hold in all criminal proceedings (*State of Iowa v. Sessions*, 1978).

3. In order to prove that the parents' education plans are inadequate, the state must show that its own requirements, regulations, etc. are educationally necessary and do in fact produce, in its own schools, better results than the parents get or are likely to get. (*Hinton et al. v. Kentucky* (1978); also *Nobel*.)

The issue of child abuse at home has been raised as a reason to force homeschooled children into public schools. In 1981 Holt wrote, "When legislators passed laws saying that the state could, for neglect, remove children from the custody of their parents, what they had in mind was children who were starved, or left naked, or were brutally beaten and tortured, or locked in closets, or chained to furniture. They did not have in mind the children of conscientious and devoted parents whose only crime was that they did not approve of the kind of education offered in the local schools. To lump such parents with gross abusers of children, as schools have quite often done already, is a most serious perversion of law and justice" (*Teach Your Own*, p. 222).

Today, Elizabeth Bartholet, Director of Harvard Law School's Child Advocacy Program, seeks to ban homeschooling on the grounds that "homeschooling violates children's right to a "meaningful education" and their right to be protected from potential child abuse, [and] keep them from contributing positively to a democratic society."

I have briefly addressed her mistaken ideas that homeschooling does not provide a meaningful education to children and how grown-up homeschoolers find work worth doing and contribute positively to society. Now I will explore her charges regarding child abuse and democracy.

Tara Westover's excellent and moving memoir, *Educated*, is used as a cudgel by Bartholet to show how cruel homeschooling can be. What needs to be stated clearly, and Westover does so repeatedly in her book, is that the neglect and physical abuse she suffered was a result of her father and brother's mental illnesses, and their erratic domination over the family. Some people, including her grandmother, try to rescue Westover from the crazy home she is in, but it isn't easy for a child to leave their parents, and it takes her many years before she can make a clean break from her family. Though homeschooling provided a cover story for her parents to keep her home, it was not the cause or reason for her abuse. Westover notes in her book that her older brother, who also left the family due to their abusive family situation, successfully homeschooled his children.

In addition to being physically abused, Westover's parents' religious beliefs prevented her from attending college, demanding instead that she be a wife and mother. This is also a clear violation of her rights as a person, let alone an American citizen. A person has the right to control and direct their own thoughts and learning and to speak them publicly. Holt describes this right as flowing from the First Amendment.

"A person's freedom of learning is part of his freedom of thought, even more basic than his freedom of speech. If we take from someone his right to decide what he will be curious about, we destroy his freedom of thought. We say, in effect, you must think not about what interests and concerns *you* but about what interests and concerns *us*" (*Escape From Childhood*, p. 149).

To create a law that requires people to attend only school to prevent potential child abuse not only infringes everyone's educational freedom, it doesn't address abuse directly. It merely puts the child in school and closes alternatives to school. This doesn't address children whose abuse is not detected by mandated reporters, nor does it address the physical abuse of children in public and private schools. Instead of using education as a workaround to protect children from abuse, let's grant all children the same protection adults have under the Bill of Rights: If an adult is physically beaten by someone, they have legal recourse to get redress. The real threat of a court case, fines, and jail keeps many from throwing punches when they want to do so.

However, our society views children as a special exception to this rule of law. Wikipedia notes, in 1977's case in *Ingraham v. Wright*, "the US Supreme Court held that the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause of the Eighth Amendment did not apply to disciplinary corporal punishment in public schools. ... As of 2018, corporal punishment is still legal in private schools in every U.S. state except New Jersey and Iowa, legal in public schools in nineteen states, permitted in eighteen, and practiced in fifteen." (*Wikipedia: US school corporal punishment*).

A good number of parents choose to homeschool because of the bullying or mistreatment their children receive in public and private schools.

Another concern about homeschooling is that it undermines democracy because homeschooled children will not learn the skills needed to participate in our democracy. The idea that compulsory, conventional schooling is needed to make proper citizens is fraught with contradictions. For instance, nowhere is it stated in our founding documents that all citizens need to be processed in public schools to participate in our democracy. Also, in the words of Ruth Sherman, a homeschooling mother in NY from 1920, who, when asked how her son would learn about democracy if she removed him from public school, replied: "You can't learn democracy in a place where it isn't practiced." Finally, some alternative schools allow children to completely participate in their school's governance in direct contrast to mainstream schooling.

We are in the midst of a quarantine and the rise of domestic abuse is more likely, so we need to create protections for children that go beyond school attendance. The pandemic is forcing us to reintegrate children into our lives and schooling is likely to be very different for a while. We need all the tools we have as a society to get through this, and homeschoolers have yeears of experience they can share about living and learning with children.

Rather than ban homeschooling, particularly in this time of quarantine, educators and parents should be talking with homeschoolers about how learning can be conceived and assessed more broadly, and how children should be treated with the same dignity and respect we give adults.

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Patrick Farenga is a leading advocate for homeschooling and self-directed learning, and author of *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*. Follow his work at [johnholtgws.com](http://johnholtgws.com) and on Twitter @patfarenga.