

TIME

Why More Urban Parents Are Choosing Homeschooling



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By **MATTHEW HENNESSEY** / CITY JOURNAL August 17, 2015

Angela Wade’s children hadn’t reached school age yet, so she had given little thought to where, or how, they’d be educated. But from the moment she set foot in her local public school—to vote on Election Day—she knew that she wouldn’t be sending her kids there. It wasn’t that the academics weren’t up to snuff or that the Astoria, Queens, elementary school suffered from a bad reputation. But what she saw in the hallways and on the cafeteria walls surprised this former New York City public school teacher with an education degree from NYU. “There were licensed characters painted on the wall. You know—Dora the Explorer and all these things,” she says. “I just feel like that’s not really the place for advertising.”

For Wade and her husband, and for city dwellers with concerns ranging from classroom environment to the Common Core, public school is out of the question. And for them, as for many urban middle-class families, paying hefty

private school tuition is not a realistic option, either. “It wasn’t so much a decision of what we were going to do—it was what we *weren’t* going to do,” she says. In the end, the Wades opted to homeschool. “Homeschooling is in some ways the easiest option. We’re driving our children’s education. We’re giving up a lot to do it, but in the end we thought it would make us most satisfied.”

At first, the Wades knew no other homeschoolers, and, like many young parents in the city, they had no family nearby, so they prepared themselves to go it alone. Before too long, however, they found a growing network of urban homeschoolers. “In a city like this, you can find your tribe,” says Wade. “You can find your homeschoolers. And there are a lot of us.”

Not so long ago, homeschooling was considered a radical educational alternative—the province of a small number of devout Iowa evangelicals and countercultural Mendocino hippies. No more. Today, as many as 2 million—or 2.5 percent—of the nation’s 77 million school-age children are educated at home, and increasing numbers of them live in cities. More urban parents are turning their backs on the compulsory-education model and embracing the interactive, online educational future that policy entrepreneurs have predicted for years would revolutionize pedagogy and transform brick-and-mortar schooling. And their kids are not only keeping pace with their traditionally schooled peers; they are also, in many cases, doing better, getting into top-ranked colleges and graduating at higher rates. In cities across the country, homeschooling is becoming just one educational option among many.

As recently as the mid-1970s, as few as 10,000 children were homeschooled in the United States. The practice was illegal in 30 states, and those who opted for home education mostly clustered in rural areas. Many of the original homeschoolers took inspiration from the writings of John Holt, a former fifth-grade teacher, whose two books, 1964’s *How Children Fail* and 1967’s *How Children Learn*, were highly critical of traditional compulsory education. The system had similar contempt for homeschoolers, tending to treat the students as truants and the parents as criminals.

Homeschooling's expansion began in 1978, when the Internal Revenue Service under President Jimmy Carter threatened to revoke the tax-exempt status of Christian day schools that it accused of using religion-based admissions standards to circumvent federal antisegregation laws. The move to shutter these schools politicized evangelical Christians across the South, Midwest, and West. The IRS ultimately caved on its threats, but the evangelicals took a message away from the battle: the federal government—as embodied by the newly established Department of Education—was out to get them. “What galvanized the Christian community was not abortion, school prayer, or the ERA,” Moral Majority founder Paul Weyrich told sociologist William Martin for his book *With God on Our Side*. “[It] was Jimmy Carter’s intervention against the Christian schools. . . . [S]uddenly it dawned on them that they were not going to be left alone to teach their children as they pleased.”

Rather than wait for the next federal attack on their values, many evangelicals instead chose to educate their children where they felt the long arm of the government could never reach—in the home. By 1983, with the rise of the Religious Right and the formation of the [Home School Legal Defense Association](#), the number of homeschooled children in the United States had ballooned to between 60,000 and 125,000. Thanks largely to the state-by-state advocacy of HSLDA lawyers, legal barriers to homeschooling began falling in the 1980s. By 1993, the practice was legal in all 50 states, though some remain suspicious (see sidebar, below).

Since then, the homeschooling population has continued to grow dramatically, while also becoming more secular. In 2002, according to a DOE survey, 72 percent of homeschooling families cited “a desire to provide religious instruction” as one of their reasons for educating in the home. By 2012, 64 percent cited religion as a motive for homeschooling; only 16 percent called it most important. “Most people assume we’re doing it for some sort of strange, creationist religious reason,” says Rachel Figueroa-Levin, a homeschooler who lives in Inwood, a middle-class neighborhood at the northernmost tip of Manhattan. “But we are stereotypical secular Jews.” Indeed, concern about “the environment of other schools” has supplanted religion as the Number One reason given for homeschooling, according to the DOE survey. Ninety-one

percent of homeschooling parents cited school environment as at least a contributing factor.

Over the last few decades, the homeschooling population has also urbanized. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 28 percent of the nation's nearly 2 million homeschoolers, or roughly 560,000 students, live in cities. That's almost as many as live in suburbs (34 percent) or rural areas (31 percent). Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles are home to swelling communities of homeschoolers. And in the nation's largest city—New York—the number of homeschooled students has risen 47 percent, to more than 3,700 children, over the last five years.

Like other homeschoolers these days, urbanites choose homeschooling for various reasons, though dissatisfaction with the quality and content of instruction at local public schools heads the list. “I got through public school, but it was never something I thought was an option for my children,” says Figueroa-Levin. A native Staten Islander, she is a columnist for *amNewYork*, a free daily newspaper, and creator of the satirical Twitter account @ElBloombito, which gained 76,000 followers for its gentle skewering of former mayor Michael Bloomberg's halting attempts at press-conference Spanish. She calls her local public school “awful,” but she's not interested in moving to a more desirable school zone, as some New Yorkers with small children do. “We like where we live. We have a nice-size apartment. Sacrificing all that for a decent public school just doesn't seem worth it,” she says.

But even after more than a decade of aggressive education-reform efforts, the “decent public school” remains a rarity in New York and in other American cities. With urban public schools inadequate or worse and quality private schools often financially out of reach, “homeschooling becomes an interesting study in school choice,” observes Brian Ray, founder of the **National Home Education Research Institute** (NEHRI) in Portland, Oregon. “You pay taxes, so the public school system in your city gets that money, then you can make the ‘choice’ of paying even more to send your kid to a private school, or to a Catholic school. More and more people are saying, ‘I'm going to homeschool.’ It's not that weird anymore.”

Homeschooler Gwen Fredette lives in Philadelphia with her husband and four children. “Our school system has a lot of problems,” she says. That’s an understatement: Philadelphia public schools are in flat-out crisis. After a video of a 17-year-old student knocking a “conflict resolution specialist” unconscious at Southwest Philadelphia’s Bartram High went viral last year, a social studies teacher at the troubled school told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “I had a better chance in Vietnam. . . . Here, you lock your door and pray no one comes in.”

Nor is violence the only concern in the city’s public schools. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study found that 60 percent of West Philadelphia schools had serious problems with mold or water damage. Budget shortfalls have left schools without nurses and made a collapsing public-education system “a chronic and seemingly immutable fact of life,” according to *Philadelphia Magazine*. Academic outcomes are horrendous. Just 10 percent of graduates from the city school district go on to get college degrees. The National Assessment of Educational Progress ranks Philadelphia near the bottom of participating cities: less than 20 percent of the city’s fourth- and eighth-graders score proficient or better in math and reading.

Fredette took one look at her local zoned school and, like Angela Wade, ruled it out. But she and her husband didn’t want to abandon a life that they enjoyed. “There are so many great things about living in the city—you kind of agree to take the good with the bad,” she says. Fredette loves that her older children use public transportation to get around. They have made friends from different cultures and backgrounds, something she’s not sure would have happened in the suburbs.

On the other side of the country, in Los Angeles, the entertainment industry has long sustained a homeschooling culture for performers. “Thousands and thousands of homeschoolers” live in the area, says Anna Smith, who runs Urban Homeschoolers, an “a la carte educational service” for about 40 homeschooling families in the Atwater Village neighborhood of northeast L.A. (See “[City of Villages](#),” Winter 2014.) “There’s a great support network because there are tons of parents,” Smith says. At Urban Homeschoolers, younger students take courses such as “Wonder of the Alphabet” and “World of

Numbers.” High school–aged kids can select from titles including “Conversational Spanish” and “The Legacy of the Cold War.” In a nod to homeschooling’s countercultural roots, there’s even a course called “Skepticism 101,” which promises to let students do their own “myth-busting.”

One myth that needs busting is that homeschoolers dream of re-creating the one-room schoolhouses of yesteryear. “Public schools were designed in a time when people were working in factories and offices and had the same job for 30 or 40 years. That’s not the way the world is anymore,” says Smith. “Nowadays you can get anything customized,” she says, including children’s educations, and modern communications technology and Internet-based curricula have enabled homeschoolers to do just that. Customization is not typically what traditional schools do well—certainly not in the sclerotic school districts of the nation’s biggest cities.

Lousy as the public schools often are, urban parochial schools don’t always measure up, either. Ottavia Egan grew up in Italy, the daughter of an American mother and an Italian father. Today, she lives on 72nd Street on Manhattan’s Upper East Side with her husband, Patrick, and their four kids. The Egan’s middle school–aged daughter had attended a local parochial school, where the books assigned tended toward “junky” literature, paranormal horror stories, and vampire-themed fiction. “These were the only kinds of books my daughter would read willingly. I had to plead with her to give the classics a try,” she says.

Ottavia admits that the thought of detaching from the traditional school model terrified her. She worried that, as a homeschooler, she would have to do everything herself. But she soon sensed that she had made the right choice. “My daughter is the type of kid who needs to ask a lot of questions. On the first day, she had 12 questions for me in the first hour. She never would have had those questions answered at school.”

Some ambitious homeschoolers craft personalized educational programs from scratch. Many others purchase off-the-shelf curriculum and supporting resources—lesson plans, reading materials, and tests for subjects ranging from American history to advanced Latin to calculus—from well-established

companies, such as Sonlight and Oak Meadow. Some companies even operate as accredited distance-learning schools, providing students with what amounts to a correspondence course. According to the HSLDA, four major curriculum types predominate: the “traditional” approach, which uses textbooks and workbooks to teach reading, writing, grammar, and spelling through repetition; the “classical” model, which emphasizes grammar, logic, and rhetoric for the study of the great works of Western literature; “unit studies,” which employs a multidisciplinary approach to exploring particular themes; and “unschooling,” a student-directed approach, popular with countercultural types, that rejects formal, curriculum-based education and lets children explore subjects at their own pace.

“I knew I wasn’t going to just wing it—especially on math,” says Wade, who initially relied on library books to flesh out lesson plans that she wrote herself. Eventually, she gave in and purchased subject-matter curricula from Sonlight. It wasn’t cheap: the second-grade curriculum package with “everything you need to teach one child for one year” in history, geography, math, science, language arts, and handwriting costs \$849. But Wade notes that if her children were in private school, “we’d be spending at least that much on books and materials.” Plus, she hopes to use the materials for her other children, and she notes the time she has saved by not having to write her own lessons and tests.

By contrast, Amy Millstein, a resident of Manhattan’s Upper West Side, is an unschooler. Her two children direct their own learning by following their natural inclinations and organic interests. Millstein offers support, when called for, and guidance, when asked, but she doesn’t otherwise shape—or interfere with—their education. The idea behind unschooling, which can work well with certain kids, is that people learn something only when they’re truly interested in learning it. “Of course, there will be holes in their education,” she concedes. “But I have holes in my education, and I went to school.”

The current crop of homeschoolers has one major advantage over the movement’s pioneers: modern technology has put all of history’s collected knowledge at their fingertips. No homeschooling parent need become an expert on differential equations or Newton’s Third Law of Motion. He or she can

simply visit YouTube's [Khan Academy channel](#) and find thousands of video lectures on these topics. Rosetta Stone, the well-known foreign-language software company, offers a specially tailored homeschool reading curriculum for just \$99 per year. Wade's children use a free website called Duolingo to practice Spanish. And many popular curriculum packages and distance-learning education programs provide Skype-based tutorials, online courses, and other learning supports.

Cities offer homeschoolers rich educational opportunities. The Fredettes of Philadelphia have used their storied city to supplement American history lessons. Their travels have brought them to the Liberty Bell and Constitution Hall, of course, but they've also visited a glassblower's studio, taken archery classes, and toured the facility where the *Inquirer*, the nation's third-oldest daily newspaper, is printed. "We even went to the Herr's potato-chip factory and watched the chips coming out of the machine," recalls Fredette. The children's favorite trip was to the studios of FOX 29 News, where, as part of a unit on meteorology, they watched a live broadcast of the midday weather report, complete with green screen.

Boston is known as a college town. Kerry McDonald lives across the Charles River in Cambridge—"between M.I.T. and Harvard," she says. On her City Kids Homeschooling blog, McDonald writes: "We use the city as our primary learning tool, taking advantage of all its offerings, including classes, museums, libraries, cultural events, and fascinating neighbors"—including a Tufts University biology professor who brings home snails and mollusks for the kids.

It's no surprise that New Yorkers see their city as "the best place on the planet to homeschool a kid," as Millstein puts it. She and her husband own a locksmith business in Manhattan and live with their two children in the neighborhood behind Lincoln Center. When her 14-year-old daughter expressed an interest in taking pictures, Millstein enrolled her at the International Center of Photography in Manhattan.

"The resources we have here in New York City are amazing," Wade enthuses.

"We study an artist and then we go to the museum and actually get to look at

that artist's paintings." Ballet for Young Audiences, a repertory dance company that plays to public school kids on field trips, needed dancers for a production of *Snow White*. Wade's nine-year-old daughter got the job—she was, after all, free during the day. Homeschooling allows kids the flexibility to pursue a passion without schedule or space constraints, whether it's taking a morning ukulele class at the local guitar shop—as McDonald's son does—or a midday outing to an L.A. beach.

Homeschooling has its critics. Some say it's a choice reserved for those with the household wealth to get by on one income—a notion most homeschoolers reject. Too often, they say, the extra money that comes from having both parents work goes mostly to cover day care or after-school expenses, making the choice of one parent (typically the mother) to stay home and teach the kids a financial wash. Other critics charge that by withdrawing their children from struggling public schools, homeschoolers do a disservice to the system. But Wade and others point out that they still support the public school system with their dollars. "I pay school taxes," she says. "But my children are not sitting in a school all day costing the city money."

"Socialization" is by far the most frequently voiced concern. How will children learn to be well-adjusted members of society, the thinking goes, if they aren't in school with other kids their age? Won't they become social outcasts? Homeschoolers, particularly urban ones, view the question as ludicrous. Cities are social places.

Anyone fearing that homeschooled kids are being improperly socialized should visit the Yonkers home of Anne and Erik Tozzi. The couple met at Oxford, where Erik, a native New Yorker, spent a year studying medieval history. The Tozzis say that living on a closely packed city street has been a social asset for their five homeschooled children. Yonkers is New York State's fourth-largest city, and the Tozzis' backyard abuts those of other houses brimming with kids. On a sunny day recently, the neighborhood bustled with young people zooming from yard to yard, shooting baskets, playing tag, and shouting with abandon. Most of the Tozzi children's neighborhood friends attend traditional schools, and some express jealousy of what goes on in the Tozzi house all day—not

much, they imagine. “We get that a lot,” says Anne, in her plummy Birmingham accent. “ ‘Oh, I wish I was homeschooled,’ because they think it means you get to sleep all day. They don’t realize that we’re actually doing schoolwork.”

Schoolwork for the Tozzi children, who range in age from two to 14, can mean a day spent at their book-strewn dining-room table discussing Chaucer or a visit to the Museum of Natural History or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. Anne holds an M.A. in classical art history and worked as a rare-book specialist for Christie’s in London and New York (where she once handled a first edition of *The Canterbury Tales*). The family makes frequent visits to the New York Botanical Garden, with its 50-acre tract of old-growth forest, and the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, less than ten miles away on the Saw Mill River Parkway.

Last year, the older Tozzi kids worked with students from around the country to write a radio script, which they produced for an all-online course. They took online classes in Latin, religion, and math with teachers based in other cities. They used Skype for live class lectures and to communicate with other students for their projects. “They did a lot of e-mailing each other and ‘meeting’ outside class times to study and prepare, which tapped into their developing maturity and independence,” says Anne. The younger children used Skype for a weekly “Story Time” with a teacher.

Some critics claim that homeschooled kids won’t be prepared to do college-level work, but available data suggest otherwise. In 2009, NEHRI’s Ray looked at the standardized test results of 12,000 homeschoolers from all 50 states, as well as Guam and Puerto Rico. He found that homeschoolers scored 34–39 percentile points above the norm on the California Achievement Test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the Stanford Achievement Test. A recent [study](#) published in *The Journal of College Admission* found that homeschooled students had higher composite ACT scores than their non-homeschooled peers and graduated college at higher rates—66.7 percent, compared with 57.5 percent. “In recent years, we’ve admitted ten or 12 homeschooled students” per year, says Marlyn McGrath, admissions director at Harvard, where each class numbers about 1,600.

Other skeptics, still focused on socialization, warn that homeschoolers may have trouble in the less structured environment of college life. Not true, says Celine Cammarata, a 25-year-old graduate of the William E. Macaulay Honors College at the City University of New York. A native of Greenwich Village, Cammarata was unschooled. She never wrote a paper or took a test before sitting for the SATs at age 15. It was her traditionally schooled peers, she says, who found freshman year so challenging. “A lot of kids struggled with the autonomy they were given. I was already used to taking care of my own education, so it was less of a big transition for me,” she says. Despite never receiving a grade before entering college, Cammarata earned a 3.98 GPA while majoring in behavioral neuroscience. She works as a lab manager at Cornell University’s College of Human Ecology and is thinking about graduate school. Her brother, also unschooled, graduated from Harvard Law School.

An alumnus who does admissions interviews for another Ivy League institution confirms Cammarata’s experience. He finds the homeschooled kids he interviews more self-assured than their peers from traditional schools. “They are much better at interacting with me as an adult,” he tells me. “They know who they are—much more so than the prep school kids.”

Neither dropouts nor go-with-the-flow conformists, the new urban homeschoolers defy easy labeling. They don’t like what they see in the public schools, but they don’t necessarily want to tear them down. They want control, but mostly in the service of flexibility. They tend to reject newfangled educational theories, but they aren’t such traditionalists that they can’t see the educational value of Skype. They are religious—some of them—but their faith compels them to engage with their neighbors, not withdraw into isolation. Above all, they want a better education than their children can typically get sitting in a traditional classroom for six hours every day. Most homeschooling parents sound satisfied with their choice.

Ottavia Egan’s daughter, for instance, now in the seventh grade, is thriving. The vampire books are gone, replaced by historical fiction and classics. “She’s happy,” her mother says. “She likes to read. What more could you want for a 12-year-old girl?”

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