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Op-Ed Release:

April 23, 2020

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[Rachel Ferguson](#)

**What's the Trade-off For Homeschoolers?
A Response to O'Donnell's "The Risk of Homeschooling"**

April 23, 2020 – Harvard is planning a conference on the risks of homeschooling for this coming fall, and in the most recent edition of Harvard Magazine, Erin O'Donnell [laments the rise of homeschooling](#), citing the work of Harvard law professor Elizabeth Bartholet. The one-sidedness of the piece, as well as the bizarre cover art depicting a child locked inside the prison bars of her house while the public school children play joyfully outside, has sparked outrage among homeschool advocates. Here, I show that O'Donnell skews the argument because she fails utterly to conceive of possible objections to the concerns that Bartholet presents.

First, Bartholet raises concerns about abuse at home, away from the mandatory reporting required of public school teachers and other staff. Certainly, one can easily imagine an abusive parent who isolates children at home, away from the threat of discovery, and no doubt, such things occur. While it's tempting to think that saving just one child from abuse is worth the "presumptive ban" on homeschooling that Bartholet suggests, to do so would involve committing the fallacy of ignoring trade-offs. If we force every student to attend school outside of the home, then the relevant question is whether, and at what rate, abuse occurs in the homes of public and private school students, or even at school itself. Such statistics are hard to pin down, but the numbers don't look good: if we limit our investigation only to abuse that occurs by staff in public schools themselves, we're already at a shocking [10% of all students](#), according to Carline Hendrie at Education Week. This statistic doesn't take into account abuse by fellow students, or by the parents of children who attend public school, meaning that the relevant number for comparison with homeschoolers must be quite a bit higher. Furthermore, suicide rates among public school attendees [spike 20% when they return each fall](#), and the numbers are [sadly increasing](#). I contend that any evaluation of homeschooling must take a comparison to the alternative into account. However, O'Donnell's article does not mention any such comparison.

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Second, Bartholet expresses concern about the high number of conservative Christians in the homeschool population, claiming that it might be as high as 90 percent. Some of these people, she contends, espouse female subservience and white supremacy. In fact, the 90% number is wildly off-base. The same number of homeschoolers identify as Christians as do so in the general population: about two-thirds, according to [Jaweed Kaleem in the Atlantic](#). The movement has shifted mightily in the last 20 years, and now includes many secular parents scared off by the growing assessment-obsession in the public schools, as well as a ballooning number of minority parents exhausted by physically unsafe and educationally deficient neighborhood schools. [Stunningly](#), the number of black homeschoolers has doubled to 8% of the homeschool population (closely approaching parity with the black population generally), and a whopping 25% of all homeschoolers are Hispanic!

To be fair to Bartholet here, there are some [notorious homeschool curricula](#) that whitewash America's racial history, and the ["Biblical courtship"](#) movement popular among a certain subset of Christians in the 1990's was certainly a patriarchal one. She's not inventing this concern out of whole cloth. But just as Harvard elites find many of these traditionalist views mind-bending, so too must an orthodox member of any world religion find the current orthodoxies of the left, aggressively propagated in many public schools: pansexuality, the denial of the reality of biological sex, and the reduction of all history to categories of oppression. Most actual Americans hold none of these extreme views, on either the hyper-conservative or hyper-progressive side. Nevertheless, it's an open secret that the schools have been [weaponized to inculcate the latter](#), while some retreat to alternative schooling in order to avoid this.

Third, Bartholet doubts that such independence in schooling can generate a proper civic education, threatening our democratic solidarity. This is a particularly galling argument on her part, for three reasons. First, studies show that civic education in public schools is woeful, with well over a third of Americans [unable to name even one right](#) elucidated in the Bill of Rights. Second, the homeschool population [boasts a high level](#) of community and political involvement, probably due to their flexible schedule and the necessity of developing habits of voluntary association for their school networks. Finally, her attitude of real disdain toward her fellow citizens who have conservative sensibilities belies her apparent value for principles of "nondiscrimination" and "tolerance."

In a truly bizarre turn, Bartholet argues that the Home Schooling Legal Defense Association is an incredibly powerful lobbying group with "really no organized political opposition," as if the public school teachers unions don't dwarf this tiny organization in size and political might. Teachers unions have [3 million members](#) and influence campaigns through endorsement and resources, while trying at every turn to [undermine](#) any and all alternatives to traditional public schooling, including charters, education savings accounts, and homeschooling.

The fact that such an article was published in Harvard Magazine is a condemnation of our cultural echo chambers. Dr. Bartholet is so out of touch with the legitimate concerns that normal American citizens have over the direction of our public schools that she forgets to even compare them with concerns about homeschooling. She needs to get out of Cambridge for a little while, where I can guarantee you her colleague's children all attend upper echelon private schools. Dear Dr. Bartholet, come out of your elite enclave and visit a few of us. You might be surprised at how diverse we really are.

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