

What the homeschool debate always misses: a response to Watson & Lee's recent Education Next piece

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[ORIGINAL ARTICLE](#)

Watson, A., & Lee, M. H. (2025, October 16). *Clapping back at homeschooling's perennial foes and fallacies*. Education Next.

KEY POINTS

- Often, debates surrounding homeschooling are based on misconceptions about who homeschools and why.
- Watson and Lee share how the homeschooling population has changed in several ways, becoming more diverse and fluid over time. The homeschooling community can't be understood as one clearly defined population.
- We draw attention to the fact that abuse and neglect do occur in homeschool settings, and that homeschooling discussions are often premised on the incorrect assumption that every parent homeschools with good intentions, and that good intentions always produce good outcomes.
- We argue that ideal homeschool policy both increases homeschooling families' access to resources and support and creates oversight structures that ensure every homeschooled child is receiving a quality education in a safe home.

Homeschooling has become the [fastest growing educational modality](#) in the US since the COVID-19 pandemic, with approximately 6% of school-aged children receiving education at home. The increase in popularity, combined with a crop of recent high-profile abuse cases, has kicked up a now-routine series of sweeping claims from both poles of the homeschool policy debate.

[A recent piece](#) by homeschool research stalwarts Angela Watson (Johns Hopkins) and Matthew Lee (Kennesaw State) underscores the reality that many of the tired debates surrounding homeschooling are not grounded in data. While Watson and Lee raise some important points about common misconceptions about homeschooling, we would like to add a “concurring opinion” and highlight a crucial aspect of the homeschooling debate that the piece does not address: the reality of abuse and neglect in homeschool settings.

The homeschooling landscape is changing in multiple ways

First, a summary of Watson and Lee’s discussion, which synthesizes findings from various studies. Specifically, Watson and Lee point out some of the most entrenched critiques of homeschooling which rest on faulty assumptions: that the homeschooling community is a monolith of mostly wealthy, white, religious parents

homeschooling their children K-12. In reality, homeschooling has become steadily more diverse both in terms of demographics and motivations over the past decade.

This shift has become even more stark since the pandemic. Combining data from the U.S. Census and several large-scale surveys, Watson and Lee show us just how diverse homeschooling is now. Some highlights: Black and Hispanic families are increasingly opting to homeschool; homeschooling parents are more likely to identify as LGBTQ than the general population; and 30% of homeschooling parents do not attend religious services.

Watson and Lee also alert us to something persistently true, but not commonly acknowledged, about home education. Homeschooling is, in their words, *dynamic*. By their estimates, 80-90% of homeschool alumni report being schooled in at least one other sector. Contrary to popular belief, it is vanishingly rare for a family to exclusively homeschool all children from kindergarten through to high school graduation. Parents switch sectors in both directions: sometimes because conventional schooling isn't a good fit, and sometimes because homeschooling isn't working out.

Watson and Lee then go on to argue that, in addition to being dynamic and diverse, homeschooling is “deserved” because 1) the right to homeschool is constitutionally enshrined, and 2) that parents want their children to be safe and conventional schools seem to pose more risks. This is where Watson and Lee fall into the very traps they are attempting to identify and critique. Namely, by assuming that homeschooling parents are universally motivated to desire safety (and their children’s educational best interests on the whole), they position homeschooling parents as monolithic. In doing so, they fail to factor in the reality of bad-faith homeschooling and negative outcomes *writ large*.

First, Watson and Lee’s assertion that the right to homeschool is constitutionally protected requires some context. Though the primary case they reference, *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, is regularly cited as creating a legal foundation for homeschooling, this court case finds its origins in compulsory education requirements that were challenged by a specific religious group (the Amish). Crucially, the case is a First Amendment religious case, not an education case. *Wisconsin v. Yoder* carves out a specific exemption for the Amish because their religion requires a unique integration of religious training with the development of agrarian skills. Therefore, compulsory education laws were waived for the teenagers

(or, as is technically more accurate, the parents were exempt from compulsory education laws).

Additionally, in their discussion of another landmark education case, *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, while acknowledging that the famous decision does enshrine parental rights because children are “not the mere creature[s] of the State,” Watson and Lee do not engage with the concluding section of the decision, which reinforces the right of the state to regulate non-public education. States have the power to regulate education, and a vested interest in doing so, in order to ensure children can be productive members of society. Therefore, parents do not have the unrestricted right to homeschool in whichever way they want if their method puts their children’s basic education and safety at risk.

More fundamentally, Watson and Lee do not acknowledge the sobering yet indisputable reality that not all homeschooling parents homeschool with good intentions, and that even good intentions do not always produce good outcomes. While homeschooling is beneficial in many cases, it is simply naive to suggest that homeschooling is categorically safe. As Watson and Lee correctly identify, “[d]espite false stereotypes, homeschoolers are not a separate category of people;” they are

“just like the larger society.” In larger society, there exists no community of people exempt from bad actors who exploit institutions and give them a bad name.

Indeed, because the status quo of homeschool oversight across the U.S. is so very lax, abusive and neglectful caregivers can use the cover of homeschooling to educationally neglect and abuse their children. For example, it is legally permissible in 49 states for caregivers to withdraw children from school during active CPS investigations, despite recent legislative efforts to redress this in several states. In 48 states, caregivers can homeschool even if someone in the household is convicted of crimes against children. Twelve states do not require any contact between homeschooling families and the state, which muddies the enforceability of compulsory education laws and makes finding vulnerable children who disappear from school exceedingly difficult.

As a result of these loopholes, a number of horrific cases of homeschooling-enabled abuse come to light every year. Most recently, Connecticut was rattled by two incidents of [child torture](#) and [murder](#), respectively. Connecticut currently does nothing to meaningfully regulate homeschooling. These cases, similar to others that have come to light in other states, follow a strikingly consistent pattern: abusive caregivers withdraw children from school to “homeschool” when suspicions of abuse are raised or social service reports are lodged by school officials.

These are not isolated incidents. We at [CRHE maintain a database](#) of publicly documented cases of severe abuse and neglect in the public record and have located over 500 cases resulting in over 220 fatalities. [State reports](#) have found patterns of caregivers with copious social service histories who nonetheless are able to withdraw children from school to homeschool them.

While Watson and Lee are very right to dismiss the idea that home educators as a whole use homeschooling to isolate and indoctrinate children, scholars have long observed isolationist tendencies in homeschooling communities. There are the recently reported extreme cases of the white nationalist and Nazi homeschooling communities in Arkansas and Ohio, respectively. Since neither state regulates curricula, both groups were fully complying with state homeschool law. That more secular and minority families choose to homeschool does not negate the fact that a subset of the homeschooling population is ideologically motivated, which can have deleterious effects on children's access to a comprehensive education and their overall experiences of socialization.

More broadly, homeschooling does not always produce stellar academic outcomes, regardless of intentions: large representative studies have found [religiously homeschooled students to be less likely to pursue higher education](#) than students

who attend public or private school, while [students who are homeschooled non-religiously are three times more likely to report being below grade level](#) than conventionally schooled peers.

In short, many homeschooling parents do their best to provide the best education possible for their children, but the choice to homeschool does not categorically endow caregivers with good intentions, and good intentions do not universally translate into good educational outcomes.

CRHE adamantly agrees with Watson and Lee that policy solutions should include equipping home educators with the necessary resources to succeed and allowing homeschooled students to equitably participate in activities available to their peers in school. But, without common sense safeguards to curb homeschooling done in bad faith and educational neglect, children will continue to be harmed under the mantle of homeschooling, something advocates of home education should feel fiercely motivated to fight. Our Make Homeschool Safe Act provides a blueprint for policy solutions that ensure every homeschooled child receives a quality education in a safe home.