

Barriers to secular homeschooling: Examining religious and nonreligious homeschooling resources in Maryland

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Published by the Coalition for Responsible Home Education

April 28th, 2026

Homeschooling is rapidly [growing](#) in the United States. Families cite a wide range of [motivations](#) for homeschooling, including concern about school environment, dissatisfaction with traditional schools, and health-related considerations. Religious instruction also plays a role for some families; however, only [53%](#) of parents identify it as a reason for homeschooling. This suggests that a significant share of homeschooling families may be interested in nonreligious homeschool options. Despite this, little research has focused on what secular homeschooling resources actually exist. This brief begins to explore this question by examining the availability of religious and nonreligious homeschooling umbrellas in Maryland.

We find that umbrella schools in Maryland operate with minimal oversight. We also find that religious homeschooling umbrellas, and in particular Christian homeschooling umbrellas, have a disproportionate influence in homeschooling communities, which may result in limited choices for families seeking secular alternatives. These findings raise questions about whether homeschooling can serve as a robust alternative to public education if secular families, or families from other religions, must participate in a largely Christian landscape.

BACKGROUND

Maryland's statute

Maryland's homeschool statute offers two options. First is homeschooling through the local school district, where parents must provide a comparable education to that taught in public schools. This option requires caretakers to maintain a portfolio of each student's work and allow the local superintendent to review it up to three times a year. The second is through a private umbrella school, which assumes all responsibility for oversight.

Umbrella schools

Families often rely on [umbrella schools](#) to help them comply with homeschooling requirements. Homeschool umbrellas are private organizations that typically provide educational or administrative resources, as well as record-keeping that helps families comply with their state's law. Many states offer private pathways through which families can homeschool, often structured as umbrella schools, though requirements and terminology may vary slightly from state to state.

Many Maryland families prefer the umbrella option, opposed to homeschooling through the local school district, for a range of reasons. Some are drawn to the resources and support umbrellas can provide, like educational resources, co-ops, and parent support groups. Others prefer umbrellas because they reduce direct interaction with the state and involve less oversight. While umbrellas often allow easier access to homeschooling, they also shift regulatory responsibilities onto the private organizations whose primary incentive is often to satisfy the preferences of the homeschooling parents (who are often paying clients) rather than ensure the homeschooled children receive a quality education.

Religious umbrellas

Religious umbrella schools may be disproportionately represented in the homeschooling landscape, at least in part, because religious families often prefer reduced state oversight and may even have theological convictions against the educational materials in public schools. As a result, umbrella schools in many states are heavily shaped by religious options, making it difficult for secular families to find comparable support.

Homeschooling depends on both a state's legal requirements and the practical reality of what resources exist to meet those requirements. Although most states include some secular umbrella options, that does not necessarily translate into meaningful access (e.g., that resource could be several hours away or inaccessible to low-income families). When most accessible options are religious, secular families may be forced to choose between joining a religious umbrella and navigating more complex and burdensome state oversight. This dynamic occurs whenever the religious option is far more practical than other options. In [Alabama](#), for example, most families homeschool through church schools, a pathway with fewer requirements than other available options (like the private tutor option that would require parents to obtain a teaching certificate). As a result, religious organizations often become the most accessible route to legally homeschool, even for nonreligious families.

This creates a situation where religious organizations play a leading role in providing access to a form of education that is regulated and recognized by the state. While umbrella schools are privately operated, they often function as the main pathway through which families can legally homeschool; in this sense, compliance with state homeschooling requirements is, in practice, often mediated through religiously affiliated systems. This raises questions around the separation of church and state,

when religiously affiliated organizations function as the most accessible pathway for families to exercise their legal right to homeschool, including for those who are not religious.

Families from non-Christian religious groups may also struggle to find resources that align with their beliefs. Additionally, some homeschooling umbrellas were found to operate within churches that exclude members of the LGBTQ community, which may limit those families' options. Maryland illustrates the challenges that non-Christian families may face when deciding to homeschool through them; this pattern, however, is not limited to Maryland but instead reflects a broader structural issue.

STATE SELECTION & METHODOLOGY

Homeschool policy varies significantly from state to state, as does the data available on homeschooling resources. [Maryland](#) was primarily chosen as a case study because it maintains a comprehensive list of umbrella schools, making its data far more comprehensive than most other states in the country. It is also [ranked](#) 31st in religiosity among U.S. states, which helps capture a landscape in which both religious and nonreligious homeschooling families are likely to reside.

Religious status and affiliation were based on connections with religious organizations, mission statements, and publicly available descriptions.

KEY FINDINGS

Maryland

Among the identified Maryland umbrella schools, religious umbrellas appeared to make up a substantial portion (**86%**) of the available options. Secular options were limited, accounting for only **8%** of the total (see Figure 1). Christian umbrella schools made up a vast majority (**92%**) of all religiously affiliated options (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

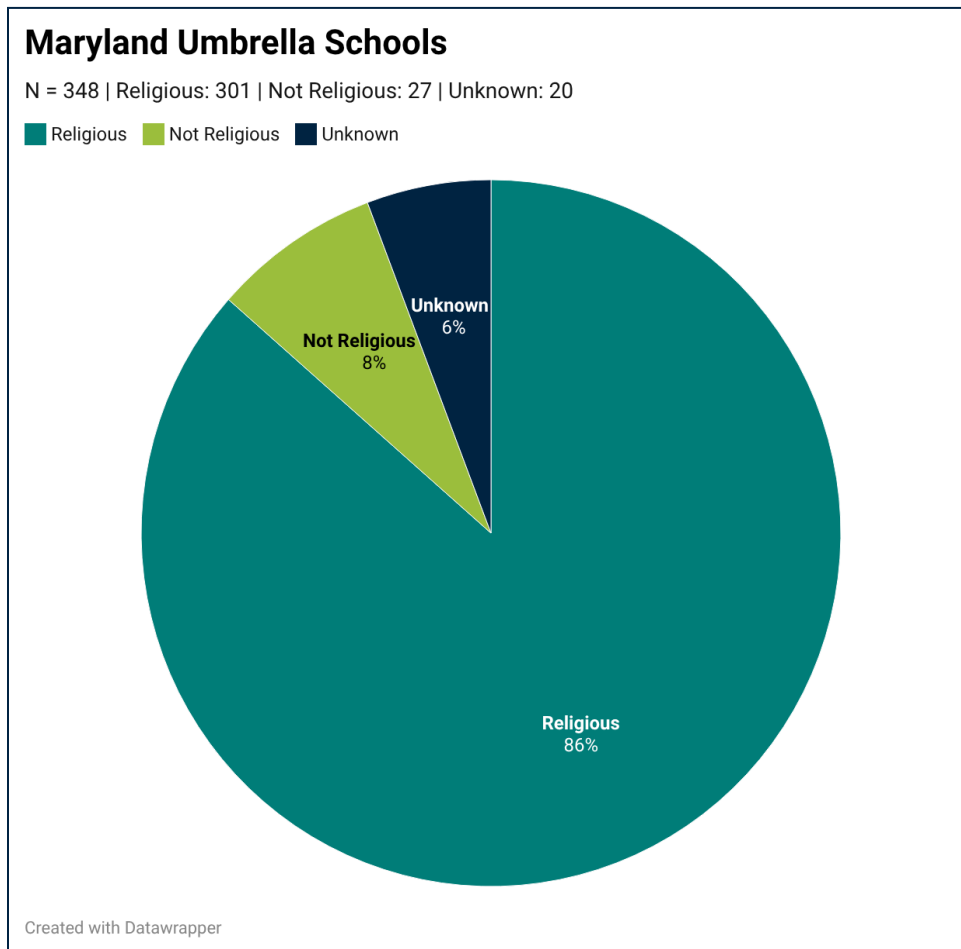
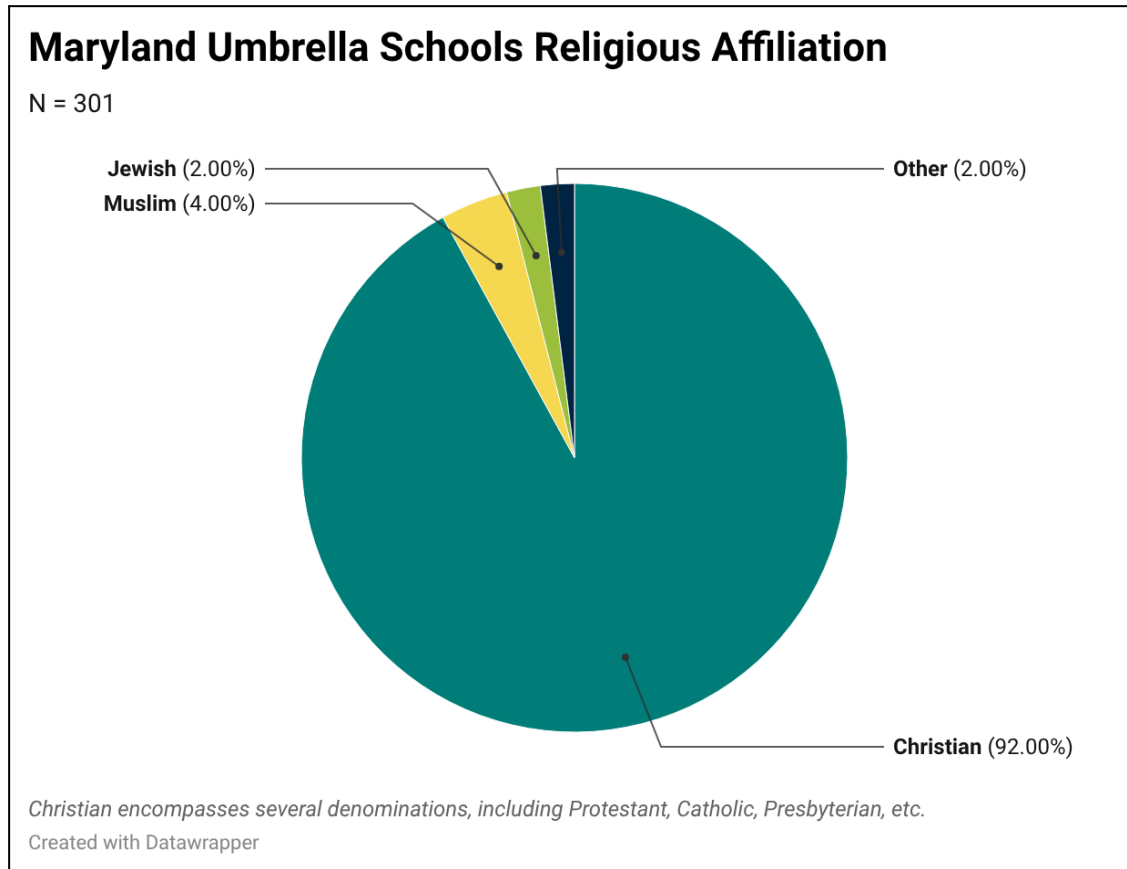


Figure 2



A Closer Look at Maryland

In addition to the religious status and affiliation of the homeschool umbrellas in Maryland, several other patterns and findings emerged during our review. Regardless of religious affiliation, some of Maryland's umbrella schools provided low-quality resources. We include these observations to highlight areas that warrant further investigation rather than to draw broad conclusions about homeschooling resources.

One notable finding was the presence of umbrellas that appeared to rely heavily on artificial intelligence (AI) infrastructure, such as AI-generated websites, curricula, and tutoring. One Maryland homeschool umbrella designed an AI chatbot claiming to be able to reveal to parents how their child thinks, learns, and processes information simply by asking them a few multiple-choice questions. Although the use of AI in homeschooling is an emerging topic with limited research, some of these AI-powered umbrellas appeared to make questionable or misleading claims, resulting in the promotion of illegitimate educational materials. For example, one umbrella school promoted AI-generated marketing materials that asserted that its curriculum helped a 5-year-old get into Johns Hopkins University. Similarly, another umbrella, albeit not AI-powered, advertised unaccredited MD and JD “degrees” for homeschooled students following completion of high school.

These examples point to a broader structural issue regarding oversight and accountability; in many cases, minimal state regulation allows questionable umbrellas to operate without scrutiny. The low barrier for establishing umbrella schools is further demonstrated through the discovery that a Maryland gun store had registered an umbrella school using its business address. While guns are traditionally [banned](#) from Maryland schools, the state allowed a gun store to register as an umbrella school.

Some Maryland homeschool umbrellas were affiliated with religious organizations promoting extremist ideologies like antisemitism and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric. Many umbrellas were also found to assist parents seeking to avoid routine childhood vaccinations, which reflects research showing that homeschooling parents are nearly [four times](#) as likely as their non-homeschooling counterparts to report delaying vaccines or skipping them altogether. Together, these findings suggest that gaps in homeschooling oversight and low barriers to creating umbrella schools may allow questionable umbrellas to flourish.

LIMITATIONS

The findings in this brief are based on publicly available information and used to approximate what a homeschooling parent may find when searching for options in Maryland. The classification of religious and secular umbrellas is not always clear-cut, and classifications may reflect subjective judgment. The patterns discussed in this brief are preliminary and are meant to highlight areas for further research.

CONCLUSION

This brief examined the availability of religious and nonreligious homeschooling resources in Maryland, as well as how the lack of oversight allows questionable umbrellas to flourish. The findings in this brief suggest that religious, namely Christian, homeschooling resources have disproportionate influence on the homeschooling landscape. While these resources may serve many families well, the relative absence of secular resources raises questions about whether homeschooling is truly accessible to everyone. Further research is needed to better understand how these resources impact families looking for secular options.

At CRHE, we are committed to ensuring that all homeschooled children, regardless of religious affiliation, race, sexual orientation, or gender identity, have access to high-quality resources that fit their educational needs.