

Who “Counts” as Homeschooled? The Case of Alaska’s Correspondence Schools

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Abstract *Defining which students “count” as homeschooled is complicated both by disparate state laws and by disagreements within the homeschooling community itself over how to categorize students enrolled in publicly funded cyber charters or virtual public schools. This paper works to clarify the definition of homeschooling by exploring the history of Alaska’s correspondence schools, where education officials have long relied on the home as an extension of their work and parents have learned to shape these same forces to serve their needs. Which factors determine who “counts” as homeschooled? The location where education takes place? Whether or not public funding is involved? Parents’ decision to take control of their children’s education? We argue that students in Alaska’s correspondence programs should “count” as homeschooled, and that both scholars and members of the homeschooling community should take an expansive and inclusive approach to defining homeschooling.*

Keywords Alaska, homeschooling, K-12 education, school choice, virtual schools, charter schools

Introduction

While approximately 1.7 million children are being homeschooled in the United States today (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017a), it is difficult to obtain an exact figure. Part of the reason for this uncertainty is that homeschooling is difficult to define (Belfield, 2005; Murphy, 2012), and different definitions may produce wildly different estimates. Is homeschooling defined by where it takes place? By who funds it? By who chooses or administers the curriculum? By who

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grades or gives feedback on student work? By which laws govern it? Who gets to define homeschooling, and which children “count” as homeschooled? Lawmakers, education officials, teachers, parents, advocacy groups, researchers, homeschooled students, and homeschool alumni have each contributed to this conversation, with the result that there are many conflicting definitions of homeschooling. This essay seeks to explore the definition of homeschooling through a case study of Alaska, where education officials have long relied on the home as an extension of their work and parents have learned to shape these same forces to serve their needs.

Legal definitions alone cannot be used to productively define homeschooling. For example, Texas does not have a homeschool law; parents who educate their children at home operate under the state’s private school law (Texas Home School Coalition, 2020a). If homeschooling were defined narrowly on purely statutory grounds, there would be no homeschooled students in the state of Texas. Yet the board of the Texas Home School Coalition, which bills itself as “the state organization for homeschooling,” clearly disagrees: “Texas leads the nation in the number of families who homeschool. THSC estimates that more than 150,000 families in the state have chosen this method of education and that more than 350,000 children are being taught at home” (Texas Home School Coalition, 2020b). In addition to Texas, seven other states (Alabama, California, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, and Nebraska) have no homeschooling statute (Coalition for Responsible Home Education, n.d.); homeschooling takes place under these states’ private school statutes. Yet when the Kentucky Office of Educational Accountability, a research arm of the state’s General Assembly, published a report on schooling in the home, they titled the report “Homeschooling in Kentucky” and used the term “homeschooling” throughout (Office of Educational Accountability, 2018). Plainly, criteria outside the legal system are being used by both homeschooling families and state agencies to define homeschooling.

Legally, homeschooling takes many forms. In states with no homeschooling statute, schooling in the home takes place under private school laws, and homeschooling parents are legally considered to be running individual single-family private schools. Several additional states, including Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, and Tennessee, have dedicated homeschool statutes but also permit homeschooling to take place under the state’s private school law, allowing parents to choose between these options. Further complicating these questions, students in some states enroll as satellite students in private schools designed to serve as legal cover for homeschooling, sometimes called “umbrella” schools. In Alabama, this is

the only legal option available to families who wish to educate their children in the home (Coalition for Responsible Home Education, n.d.). By our estimate, over one-third of students receiving their education at home are considered private school students under the laws of their states. This includes all students educated at home in Alabama, California, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, and Texas, as well as half of those educated at home in Florida and Louisiana and one-quarter in Maryland, Michigan, and Tennessee. For numbers, see, Coalition for Responsible Home Education (2017).

Homeschooling is also difficult to define in terms of a single philosophical principle. For many homeschooling advocates, inclusion of single-family private schools and students enrolled in private umbrella schools in the definition of homeschooling is motivated by the idea that “a significant aspect of homeschooling is the independence from government control that it holds for every family regardless of the approach to education they choose” (We Stand for Homeschooling, 2003). Murphy (2012) argues that educational paradigms with less regulatory oversight in the dimensions of funding, provision, and regulation are more likely to be considered “homeschooling.” Yet, the wariness of government institutions that motivates many homeschooling parents (Kunzman & Gaither, this volume) cannot be used alone as a necessary and sufficient characterization of homeschooling, since it pervades the discourse about traditional private schools as well (Carper & Hunt, 2007).

One state, Alaska, presents a unique opportunity for examining which children “count” as homeschooled. While Alaska has a minimalistic homeschool statute with virtually no requirements (and also allows homeschools to operate as single-family private schools if they prefer), a large number of students in that state are enrolled in public or charter “correspondence” programs that allow students to be educated at home using curriculum chosen and administered by individual parents while providing parents with around \$2,000 per child in reimbursements for approved educational expenses (McKittrick, 2016; Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2019). As we will show, these programs, which have been operating in some form since the 1930s, were redesigned in the late 1990s to meet the needs of modern homeschooling families and are not traditional correspondence programs. Yet these programs are publicly funded, and in many cases are operated by school districts.

In this essay, we examine the unique history of non-traditional education in Alaska to examine a simple question: what determines whether a child counts as

homeschooled? In seeking to answer this question, we will explore the status of virtual schools and examine gatekeepers’ reactions to educational options that have combined learning at home with public school enrollment. We then turn to Alaska’s history to explore the creation of hybrid programs that are both state-funded and embraced and shaped by homeschooling parents. We argue that Alaska’s correspondence schools are homeschools, according to the most widely understood definitions of that term.

Is All Home-Based Education Homeschooling?

Distance education, including correspondence and virtual schools, has been a common battleground for those who would define homeschooling. While these programs often differ from traditional schools only in the location where instruction takes place—their defining feature is that instruction takes place at home, rather than in a school building—in every other way these programs may resemble traditional schools, including teachers, classmates, administrators, and curriculum not specifically curated by parents. Yet the many similarities these programs share with traditional schools may not put them as out of step with other forms of home-based instruction as it might initially seem.

For decades, some parents who educate their children at home have purchased all-in-one educational packages that provide curriculum, education standards, and testing. In 1967, Paul Lindstrom, an Illinois pastor, founded Christian Liberty Academy Satellite Schools (CLASS), a correspondence school that enrolled homeschooled students. Lindstrom urged parents “to remove their K-12 children from public schools and, with or without local approval, simply teach them at home” (Gaither, 2008, pp. 145-146). In his 2008 history of homeschooling, education historian Milton Gaither wrote that, “Christian Liberty Academy’s correspondence program was throughout the 1970s and 1980s the dominant player in Christian home school curricula” (Gaither, 2008, pp. 152-153). Students enrolled in Christian Liberty Academy mailed in completed workbooks for grading and received a Christian Liberty Academy diploma upon graduation. Other correspondence programs catering to homeschooling families sprang up as well, including A Beka Book, which offered a Video Home School program that featured “the master teachers of Pensacola Christian School in a traditional classroom setting for the instruction of your child at home” (Stevens, 2001, p. 56). Use of purchased curriculum is still commonplace; one 2007 dissertation on homeschooling practices refers to the traditional or “boxed curriculum” as “the most common type of

approach to homeschooling. This style is the traditional, pre-packaged curriculum shipped ready for use” (McKeon, 2007, p. 15). In these undisputed instances of homeschooling, children’s coursework is fully designed, and often implemented and graded, by educators outside the home.

Researchers studying school choice have often experienced difficulties in categorizing distance learning programs. According to Murphy’s (2012) review of definitions of homeschooling, most scholars stipulate that homeschooling is defined by education that takes place in the home (or at least not in a school building), while only some scholars mention parental responsibility, supervision, monitoring, or leadership as a defining characteristic (Murphy, 2012, p. 5). The United States Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which regularly conducts research on homeschooling as part of its National Household Education Survey (NHES), counts students as homeschooled if their education takes place in the home instead of in a school, without regard to whether these students are enrolled in a publicly funded program: “Homeschooled students are school-age children who receive instruction at home instead of at a public or private school either all or most of the time” (McQuiggan, Megra, & Grady, 2017). In recent years, the NCES has faced challenges in understanding the data they have collected on homeschooling. In the 2012 and 2016 surveys, an initial screener has asked parents to choose between homeschooling and public or private school, but each time some respondents selected public or private school only to later indicate that their child was educated at home for some or all of their classes. NCES researchers retrospectively included these students in their count as homeschooled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

The NCES data indicate that parents’ views on whether virtual school students are homeschooled may vary according to individual family values and practices. NCES researcher Sarah Grady wrote in 2017 that “with the growth of virtual education and cyber schools, some parents are choosing to have a child schooled at home but not to personally provide instruction.” Grady added that “whether or not parents of students in cyber schools define their child as homeschooled likely varies from family to family” (Grady, 2017). The 2019 version of the survey no longer forces respondents to choose between homeschool and public or private school; instead, the survey notes that “students today take part in many different types of schools and education settings” and asks respondents to choose all that apply from a substantive list of educational options. Another change: the 2019 version of the

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survey will ask parents questions about virtual schooling for the first time (S. Grady, personal communication, February 4, 2020).

The categorization of distance learning programs becomes even more complex when the issue of state funding is considered. Cyber charters—publicly-funded virtual school programs—emerged in the early 1990s, and many underwent serious public critique; several states passed new laws regulating cyber charters after it came to light that these programs were “making scandalous profits by offering very minimal services” (Gaither, 2008, p. 214) while receiving public funding for every student enrolled. In some cases these programs recruited existing homeschooling families and provided only minimal reimbursements for computers and textbooks. Other virtual school programs hired certified teachers and walked students through a set online curriculum. By 2006, in addition to cyber charters, twenty-two states and numerous local school districts offered virtual school programs (Gaither, 2008, pp. 213-18). The main distinction between these programs and the distance learning programs that have traditionally been a mainstay of homeschooling seems to be state funding and regulation.

Virtual public and charter schools are now a non-trivial category of the educational landscape. In 2017-18, there were 501 full-time virtual public and charter schools in the United States, enrolling 297,712 students in grades K-12 (Molnar et al., 2019). Of these students, 21% were enrolled in district-run programs while the remainder were enrolled in charter-operated virtual schools (Molnar et al., 2019). These figures may be an underestimate, however. In 2014-15, almost 168,000 K-12 students in California received at least 50% of their instruction at home through a district-run independent study program, with the structure of these programs varying from district to district (California Department of Education, 2019). While it is not known conclusively how many students are educated at home through virtual public or charter school programs the number is clearly substantial.

Homeschooling families and advocacy organizations have hotly debated whether virtual schools that receive public funding “count” as homeschools. According to Gaither, online home-based education programs in 2008 were “blurring the boundaries between home and school” and had “created tensions among some homeschoolers” (Gaither, 2008, p. 213). In 2003, a number of prominent homeschool leaders drafted and signed a statement that explicitly excluded students at publicly-funded virtual schools from their movement. “The very nature, language and essence of homeschooling are being challenged and even co-opted by a vast array of emerging educational programs which may be based in

the home, but are funded by government tax dollars, bringing inevitable government controls,” the statement declared (We Stand for Homeschooling, 2003). “There is a profound possibility that homeschooling is not only on the brink of losing its distinctiveness, but also is in grave danger of losing its independence.” The statement contended that “charter school enrollees are public school students,” and concluded that “the words and concepts of homeschooling should not be used by publicly-funded school programs” and that “families should honestly call such enrollment what it is—enrollment in public school.” The statement ended by declaring that “the signers to this document reclaim homeschooling” (We Stand for Homeschooling, 2003), suggesting an effort to narrow the definition of homeschooling to exclude those enrolled in publicly-funded programs.

Not all homeschool leaders disavowed those enrolled in publicly-funded programs, however. Mary Griffith, author of a popular homeschool guide, condemned the exclusionary statement in its entirety (Griffith, 2003). Griffith began by establishing her credibility with those who sought to write virtual school students out of the homeschooling movement: “I’ve been an independent homeschooling parent throughout my children’s entire educational lives. We’ve never used a public school homeschooling program, nor a charter school, nor a cyberschool. We’ve never used a packaged curriculum, nor hired the services of an advisory teacher or an umbrella school.” But despite this independence, Griffith wrote, “I’ve never been a homeschooling parent myself, and my children have never been homeschoolers.” Griffith explained that in her home state of California “there are no such people as homeschoolers,” because education in the home takes place under the state’s private school law. Yet “[i]n the sixteen years I’ve followed the homeschooling movement, I’ve never had anyone argue that I was not a homeschooling parent” (Griffith, 2003).

Griffith was well positioned to weigh in on this issue. While homeschooling parents in California can register their homes as individual private schools, as Griffith did, many choose to instead enroll their children in private schools that allow parents to teach their children at home while handling the paperwork and legal status for them. In addition, many California school districts offer independent study programs that allow students to be taught at home in some or all subjects, while receiving guidance from the school district. In her many years being active in her local and state homeschooling community, Griffith knew families that used all of these options. “I’ve also known many so-called independent homeschoolers who were in fact enrolled in private schools with enrollments of 600 or 700 or more,”

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she noted. She also pointed to parents in rural areas who had used independent study programs through their school districts for decades, and had become heavily involved in local homeschool support groups. “Maybe we shouldn’t have been calling them homeschoolers all these years,” she quipped (Griffith, 2003).

While the homeschooling leaders who signed the statement against virtual schools argued that lack of government control and public funding was foundational to the definition of homeschooling, Griffith positioned parents taking control of their children’s education as the central defining characteristic of homeschooling. “Who gets to decide on the standards for distinguishing real homeschoolers from faux homeschoolers?” Griffith asked. “While there’s no way I’d want to have to draw that line myself, I can’t think of anyone else I’d be willing to do it, either.” Griffith charged the homeschooling movement with “suffering from fear of its own success” and accused its leaders of being uncomfortable with change. “I know too many families who’ve struggled with conventional public and private schools and just happened to hear of a public independent study program that might better suit their kids. I’m not about to tell those families who are suddenly thrilled to discover more flexible options for their kids that they can’t call themselves homeschoolers,” Griffith wrote. “From their own perspective, they are making decisions for themselves and taking control of their kids’ education” (Griffith, 2003). In Griffith’s view, the level of parental investment was much more important than the source of funding for defining what counted as homeschooling.

In the years since this exchange, some homeschool groups have continued to argue that virtual public or charter school students should not be considered homeschooled students, and even that publicly-funded virtual school programs are a threat to homeschooling (Wisconsin Parents Association, 2004; Longbottom, 2007; Woodruff, 2019). At the same time, an increasing number of parents across the country have enrolled their children in these programs. Gaither sought to explain this conflict by positing that veteran homeschool leaders’ rhetoric “has demonized government-run schooling for so long that it is very difficult for many of them to think in terms of new paradigms of cooperation and hybridization” and that “any rapprochement with government is by definition capitulation to the enemy” (Gaither, 2008, pp. 217-18).

The debate among researchers and homeschooling advocates alike over the status of children who are educated at home while enrolled in a separate public or private school program indicates several key takeaways. First, private school-in-a-box programs have always been unquestionably considered part of homeschooling

by all parties. Second, these programs differ from public and charter distance learning programs only in how they are funded. Third, some homeschooling gatekeepers consider publicly-funded programs to fall under the definition of homeschooling, particularly when parents are highly invested. And fourth, many families who use these programs identify the education they are providing as homeschooling.

A History of Homeschooling in Alaska

Alaska's educational system presents an interesting opportunity to study the various perspectives on the definition of homeschooling, since its unique historical, cultural, and geographical features have led to a longer period of debate than in most states about the role of the family and the government in children's education.

The history of formal education in Alaska begins with the colonization of Alaska by Russian and American settlers. The earliest formal schools in Alaska were typically mission schools designed to educate the territory's large Native population (Huhndorf & Huhndorf, 2014). After the United States purchased the territory in 1867, the Bureau of Indian Affairs took responsibility for educating Native children. The Klondike Gold Rush at the end of the century brought with it a growing number of white settlers, including families. In 1905, the federal government passed the Nelson Act, which created a dual system of racially segregated schools: Alaska Natives would continue to be educated under the auspices of the Secretary of the Interior while the Alaskan territorial government would create schools for "white children and children of mixed blood who live a civilized life." In practice, white schools excluded children of mixed race, and the territorial government created a system of state-wide segregation that mirrored Jim Crow laws in the U.S. South. The last thirty-seven schools managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs were not transferred to the state of Alaska until 1982 (Huhndorf & Huhndorf, 2014).

After several decades of directly overseeing an education system for Alaska's white children, the territorial legislature created a formal Board of Education in 1933 (Hanson, 2000). Given Alaska's unique geography, providing schooling for children in rural areas proved to be a challenge. In 1938, looking for cost-effective solutions, Commissioner of Education Anthony E. Karnes attended a conference on correspondence education in Victoria, British Columbia. The following year, the legislature authorized the Board to use funding set aside for "Schools Outside Incorporated Cities" on correspondence courses, provided it would "help eliminate

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rural school expenses” (Hanson, 2000, p. 21). The first year, Karnes purchased eleven correspondence courses from Calvert Correspondence School, a private correspondence program in Baltimore, Maryland, that claims to have “invented modern homeschooling” in 1910 (Calvert Education, 2020) and remains popular among homeschooling parents today (Cooper, 2005; Tanner, 2019). As the Board began to recognize the savings potential correspondence education offered over running small rural schools, its commitment to the program increased. During the 1941 school year, the Board purchased 81 courses (Hanson, 2000, pp. 22-23). “Correspondence study was the original home schooling program in Alaska,” explains Margaret MacKinnon, who spent 25 years as a correspondence school teacher. “In a state as large as Alaska, with a small population most of who [sic] were scattered in remote areas of the state, there were few other cost-effective means of educating students in those remote areas” (MacKinnon, 2003, p. 1).

Over the next several decades, Alaska outgrew its reliance on public funding for privately administered curriculum (Hanson, 2000; MacKinnon, 2003). The Board of Education purchased individual high school correspondence courses through the University of Nebraska; by 1958, 271 secondary students were enrolled in correspondence study courses. Around this time, the Board began exploring ways to bring elementary correspondence in-house. Ordering programs through Calvert was expensive, and mailing completed work to Maryland to be graded was time consuming. In 1960, Calvert agreed to allow the Board to use Alaskan teachers to grade the programs. In 1961, Dorothy Johnson became the first Director of Correspondence Study in Alaska. In addition to overseeing a team of certified teachers that graded students’ work, Johnson also began writing correspondence courses for each grade, tailoring the curriculum to Alaskan students. Johnson created a yearbook and gave Central Correspondence Study (CCS), as it became known, a sense of school pride and community. By 1970, the program enrolled 445 elementary students and 261 secondary students (Hanson, 2000; MacKinnon, 2003).

The CCS program remained popular with Alaska parents for several decades despite challenges to its operations. In 1975, in response to lawsuits brought by Alaska Native parents, the state legislature passed Senate Bill 35, dissolving the Alaska State-Operating School System, which had overseen schools outside of incorporated areas, and created new, regional school districts. Seeking to empower school boards, the Department of Education announced that it would decentralize correspondence study, dissolving CCS and allowing each school district to oversee its own program of correspondence education. CCS teachers and administrators

lobbied the state legislature for support. The result was Senate Bill 367, which provided for the continuation of CCS; authorized school districts to administer their own correspondence programs; made correspondence study available to all students regardless of their proximity to a school; and raised state funding for correspondence education to the same per-pupil level as public schools (MacKinnon, 2003; Hanson, 2000). In 1986, a promotional pamphlet described CCS as “a complete K-12 education program delivered to students at home through the mails” in which a “home teacher, usually a parent, provides daily assistance and support to the student. The home teacher works under the supervision of a certificated teacher” while “CCS provides textbooks, materials and supplies to the student” (Alaska Department of Education, 1986, p. 3). This description emphasized the parent’s involvement in administering the curriculum and the partnership between school and family.

Meanwhile, by 1984, 26 of Alaska’s 53 school districts had opened their own correspondence programs; parents living in these districts could choose between the local district program and CCS (Hanson, 2000, p. 59). In 1981, one Alaskan parent would outline the distinction between the district programs and CCS: “There are about 50 children (all grades) in the Fairbanks school district who use the [Fairbanks district] program. This Fairbanks office is only for students within the school district—the ‘bush’ students work through Juneau, the head office...” (Holt, 1981, p. 4). It was during this period that parents in the United States began educating their children at home due not to distance but to other factors: religious concern about secular indoctrination in the public schools, as well as concern about the institutional school setting and a desire for flexibility. In shifting from home education by necessity to home education by choice, Alaskan parents followed nationwide trends. Milton Gaither describes “the modern homeschooling movement” which emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as “fundamentally different from earlier efforts to educate children in the home” (Gaither, 2008, p. 2). Unlike many other states, however, Alaska had a long history of correspondence education.

The birth of the national homeschooling movement led to the growth of CCS. In 1984, *Growing Without Schooling*, a national homeschool newsletter published by homeschool pioneer John Holt, printed an informational update from CCS announcing that enrollment in the program had increased by nearly 30% over the previous four years. “In May the CCS K-8 program was declared one of the nation’s exemplary education programs by the U.S. Dept. of Education,” the update announced (Holt, 1984, p. 2). The fact that CCS was featured in Holt’s newsletter,

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despite its public funding, development, and administration, indicates that it met the definition of homeschooling held by homeschooling parents and gatekeepers at the time. By the 1984-85 school year, enrollment in CCS had risen to 1,294. An Alaska Department of Education study concluded in early 1985 that, despite its mission to determine whether the centralized CCS program or the locally-operated programs were more effective, there was too much inter-program variation to make any definitive statement on the matter, except that locally-operated programs were more expensive to run than CCS and provided face-to-face contact with supervising teachers (Interwest Applied Research, 1985, p. 6).

As the ideologies of the modern homeschooling movement became more popular, some Alaska parents began to disagree on whether CCS should be considered homeschooling. Jack Phelps, a fundamentalist pastor in Talkeetna, objected to these programs' use of secular curriculum. He successfully petitioned the local school board to exempt his children from the compulsory attendance statute (Hanson, 2000, pp. 66-68). Other families turned to another legal option: in 1983, the legislature created a new category of private school exempt from most state requirements (Hanson, 2000, pp. 64-65). While Betty Breck initially enrolled her daughter in a correspondence program, she began registering her home as an exempt private school as soon as this option became available. Breck, who lived in Juneau, homeschooled because she believed formal education constrained children. By registering as an exempt private school, she explained, she could create her own educational program, without the schedule or requirements of a correspondence program (Enge, 1987). During the 1995-1996 school year, the only school year for which statistics exist, 919 students were being homeschooled through the state's private school law (Hanson, 2000, p. 70).

Phelps, the fundamentalist pastor, was not fully satisfied with these options. He began to network with other parents homeschooling outside of correspondence programs and to call publicly for a dedicated homeschool law. In 1990, Phelps helped write position papers for Wally Hickel, gubernatorial candidate for the right-wing Alaska Independence Party ticket. When Hickel won, he appointed Phelps to the State Board of Education (Hanson, 2000, pp. 76-77). Phelps was never confirmed; his promotion of vouchers and his stated desire to “recapture public education from the forces that have made it a tool of leftist social engineers” made him a controversial figure. Ultimately, however, it was Phelps' praise for former Klan leader David Duke in a church newsletter that sunk his confirmation (Blumberg, 1991; Frost, 1991). Two years later, in 1993, Phelps took a job as a

legislative aide. He spent his time at the state capitol building relationships with lawmakers, providing them with information packets about homeschooling, and lobbying for a homeschool law (Alaska Ear, 1993; Hanson, 2000, p. 78).

In early 1997, at Phelps' urging, state senator Loren Leman introduced Senate Bill 134, which added an exemption to the compulsory attendance statute for any child "being educated in the child's home by a parent or legal guardian" (Legislative News, 1997; Alaska State Legislature, 1997, June 4). The bill drew little objection, in part because its supporters argued that it would simply codify what was already taking place under the exempt private school statute, and in part because the Alaska Department of Education sent Nancy Buell, the director of its Teaching and Learning Support division, to speak at hearings in favor of the bill (Alaska State Legislature, 1997, May 1; Alaska State Legislature, 1997, April 11). Buell explained that the private exempt school law was never intended to include homeschooling families, and that homeschooling parents' use of this provision had left the department unable to maintain an accurate list of either private exempt schools or children being homeschooled. While SB 134 initially required children homeschooled under the new statute to receive "an organized educational program" in "reading, spelling, mathematics, science, history, civics, literature, writing, and English grammar," the bill was subsequently amended to remove this requirement. When asked about the provision's removal, Buell stated only that while the department believed all children should receive an education in basic skills, it did not intend to regulate homeschoolers. While eight of the twenty state senators voted against removing this provision, these same senators subsequently voted to pass the amended bill unanimously. SB 134 passed both houses of the state legislature without a single nay vote and was signed into law by the governor on July 10, 1997 (Alaska State Legislature, 1997, June 4).

An additional option for Alaska's homeschooling families was introduced that same year—one that would allow state funding for curricula selected by individual parents. On June 17, three weeks before the governor signed SB 134 into law, an open house in Fairbanks introduced homeschooling parents to a new idea: a correspondence program designed not for children who lived too far out in the bush to attend school, but for and by modern homeschooling families. Rather than administering an outside curriculum, parents whose children enrolled in this new program could choose, design, and tailor their children's curriculum themselves while receiving state reimbursements for education-related expenses like computers

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and tutoring. The program, Interior Distance Education of Alaska (IDEA), would prove very attractive to homeschooling parents (Hanson, 2000).

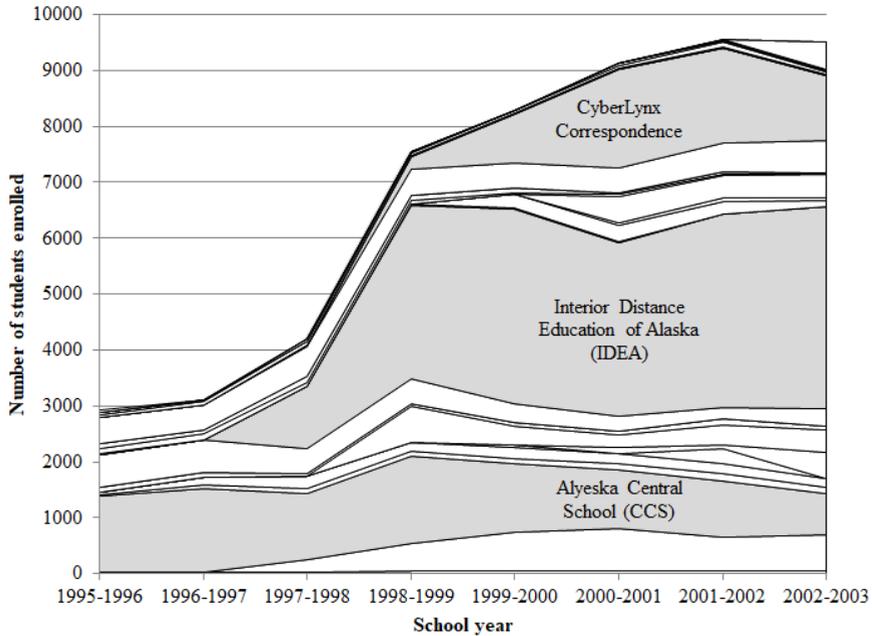
While IDEA and the copycat programs that followed it would frustrate some homeschool activists, who saw enrollment in publicly-funded programs as a betrayal of a central tenet of homeschooling, IDEA was the brainchild not of education officials but of homeschooling parents themselves (Hanson, 2000). When Paul and Merrily Verhagan began homeschooling in Nenana in the 1980s they enrolled their children in CCS, the state correspondence program. As a growing number of their nine children reached school age, however, the Verhagans found it increasingly difficult to implement a correspondence program that had a separate curriculum for each grade. The Verhagans tried a district correspondence program only to face the same frustrations. This motivated them to design a correspondence program centered on the needs of homeschooling families like theirs—one that would allow individual parents to create their own curriculum. During the 1996-1997 school year, the Verhagans worked with Rod Pocock, a principal in Tanana City School District, to create a correspondence program like the one they envisioned. When the district’s leadership turned over at the end of the school year, Pocock and the Verhagans approached several other school districts before asking Carl Knudsen, superintendent at Galena City School District, for permission to bring their correspondence program to his district. Knudsen, who needed extra funding for a planned boarding school, quickly approved the proposal (Hanson, 2000, pp. 85-90; Shinohara, 1998).

In the summer of 1997, as the governor signed SB 134, the Verhagans, Pocock, and Knudsen worked with Lisa Sites, the leader of Fairbanks’ homeschool support group, to enroll homeschooling families in their program, with the promise of receiving between \$1,200 and \$1,600 per child for education-related expenses. Within three months, the program had enrolled 1,150 students. Because IDEA enrolled students across district lines, other districts began to accuse IDEA of stealing their students. For its part, the state’s department of education refused to release the program’s funds, accusing IDEA of enrolling phony students. IDEA experienced administrative problems early on; it was unprepared for such a large enrollment so quickly, and struggled to reimburse parents for certain expenses. After questions arose about the use of public funds for religious materials, IDEA informed parents that it would not pay for religious curriculum. Gradually, IDEA’s administrative problems were resolved. The department of education called over 500 enrolled families to ensure that IDEA was delivering what it promised, and,

satisfied, released IDEA's funding (Hanson, 2000, pp. 91-100). In the spring of 1998, a section in Senate Bill 36, a public education bill, addressed correspondence study directly. The provision lowered the funding correspondence programs receive to 80% of the regular per-pupil allowance, but it also legitimized IDEA's cross-district reach by referring not only to the department-run state-wide correspondence program and district correspondence programs, but also to districts that offered state-wide correspondence study programs (Alaska State Legislature, 1998; Hanson, 2000, 100-101). By its one-year mark in July 1998, IDEA had already enrolled 1,800 students for the next school year (Shinohara, 1998).

With the introduction of the IDEA model, the number of students enrolled in correspondence programs increased dramatically. During the 1996-97 school year, the year before IDEA was founded, roughly 3,000 Alaskan children were enrolled in the state's correspondence programs; nearly half of these students were enrolled in the state-wide CCS program, which had been renamed Alyeska Central School (see Figure 1). By contrast, during the 2002-03 school year, roughly 9,500 Alaskan students—over three times the total six years earlier—were enrolled in correspondence programs. Less than one-tenth of these students were enrolled in Alyeska, which still used its in-house curriculum (enrollment in Alyeska decreased from 1,351 to 724 during this six-year period). Half of all correspondence school students in 2002-03 were enrolled in two district-run correspondence programs that drew students from across the state: IDEA and CyberLynx. CyberLynx was founded in 1998 and was the first program to replicate IDEA's model. While IDEA and CyberLynx drove the growth in correspondence school enrollment, enrollment outside of these programs grew by fifty percent as other districts followed their example, retooling their correspondence programs to meet the needs of homeschooling families less interested in a set curriculum than in access to resources (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 1996; 1997; 1998; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2002; 2003). Some correspondence schools offered families multiple options (Frontier Charter School, 2020), while others focused solely on reimbursing parents for curricular materials they selected and administered themselves. The increase in popularity of the new model of flexible correspondence programs indicated their appeal to a larger group of homeschooling parents—now, both families who wanted to use an out-of-the-box curriculum and families who wanted to choose their own curriculum could be accommodated with state funds.

Figure 1: Number of students enrolled in Alaska correspondence programs, 1995-2003



As an increasing number of programs copied IDEA’s model, questions arose over these programs’ expenditures. In 2003, reports surfaced that some correspondence programs, most notably PEAK and PACE, were enrolling students who attended a private school full time. Equally concerning to many, some correspondence programs were reimbursing parents for horseback riding lessons, gym memberships, and family vacations to Washington, D.C. (Pesznecker, 2003). The following year, the Board of Education responded to these concerns by creating new rules for correspondence schools, barring correspondence programs from reimbursing parents for expenditures on family travel, uniforms, or family passes to sports and recreational facilities. The new rules also mandated that 50% of students’ correspondence courses be in core subject areas, effectively barring private school students from enrolling in these programs to access funding for extra-curricular activities (Pesznecker, 2004).

Around the same time, Alyeska Central School, which maintained its traditional format and hired teachers to write and grade students’ curriculum,

narrowly avoided being closed. After some discussion, the program, which had seen a decline in enrollment over time, was transferred to Yukon-Koyukuk school district for management (Cavanagh, 2003). Yet enrollment in Alyeska Central School continued to decline, and, with the 2004-05 school year, the program began to cost Yukon-Koyukuk money. When only 127 students signed up for the 2006-07 school year, far fewer than expected, administrators announced that the program would close (“Correspondence School Set to Close,” 2007). After 68 years of operation, the traditional correspondence school model had become unpopular. It was the IDEA model, which paired independent homeschooling with district support and resources, that was successful. In recent years, some districts have innovated once again, creating correspondence programs that enroll high-school dropouts and help them obtain their diplomas through online courses and individual support (Hanlon, 2016).

In a master’s thesis completed at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks in 2000, homeschooling mother Terje Ann Hanson wrote that

[t]he advent of IDEA, CyberLynx and other tax-funded home school assistance programs, that allowed the formerly private home schoolers to continue on in much the same way as they always had, blurred the lines between the public school students, educated at home, and the private home schooler (Hanson, 2000, p. 105).

Prior to the creation of IDEA, families interested in educating their children at home either enrolled their children in a correspondence program and used state curricula, graded by state teachers; or homeschooled under the exempt private school statute. After IDEA was created and the new homeschool statute was passed concurrently, families had a new set of choices: homeschool through correspondence programs, with access to state funds and the flexibility to choose their own curriculum; or homeschool independently under the homeschool statute. “Although many families realized they signed onto a public home education option,” Hanson writes, “it was so unlike the more institutionalized correspondence options, that they did not realize that by state law definition, they were no longer considered home schoolers” (Hanson, 2000, p. 106). This change would be a lasting one. “Modern correspondence schools still enroll home-schooled kids as public school students, but no longer mail each one a packet of work,” Erin McKittrick wrote in 2016 in a

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long piece on homeschooling in the *Anchorage Daily News*. “Most home-school parents find the correspondence programs a good bargain” (McKittrick, 2016).

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The majority of homeschooling families in Alaska have embraced the correspondence school model. In the 2019-2020 school year, there were an estimated 15,000 P-12 students enrolled in Alaska’s 32 publicly-funded correspondence schools (Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, 2020a; 2020b; see also McCracken & Coleman, this volume, for estimation procedures). Lisa Cavan, a state-wide homeschool coordinator for the AKTEACH correspondence program, conducted a survey on Alaska homeschooling practices in both correspondence and independent homeschooling families throughout the state. Approximately 80% of her respondents had enrolled at least one child in a correspondence program, and 100% agreed that Alaska was one of the best places to homeschool, often because of “the funds available to them and freedom to choose” (Cavan, 2017, p. 58). Alaska resident Meghan Wotring, who was homeschooled herself (first in Oklahoma and then in an independent homeschool in Alaska), chose to continue the tradition with her own children: “Rather than embarking independently under the state homeschool statute, we chose to homeschool through Raven Homeschool, a local homeschooling charter [correspondence program]” (Wotring, 2019). When Sarah Vance was elected to the Alaska state legislature in 2018 (R-31), she stated that she was homeschooling one child through the Connections correspondence program, while her other children attended traditional public and private schools. Vance was motivated by her belief in “parent’s choice, and focusing on the education of what each individual child needs to thrive” (Armstrong, 2019). Clearly, the families who enroll their children in Alaska’s correspondence schools consider themselves to be homeschooling families.

However, independent homeschooling families in Alaska who have rejected the correspondence school model continue to debate the question of which legal options count as homeschooling. While the nature of Alaska’s homeschooling law makes it impossible to determine how many independently homeschooled children there are, our estimates indicate there may be, at most, a few thousand. According to the U.S. Census, there were an estimated 132,988 children (age five to 17) in Alaska in 2010 (Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development, Research and Analysis Section, 2013). In the 2009-2010 school year, 129,187

children were enrolled in Alaska public schools, including correspondence schools (grades K-12) (Alaska Department of Education & Early Development, 2010). The remaining 3,801 children most likely attended private schools or independent homeschools. The NCES reports that there were 4,426 children in private schools in Alaska in 2009-2010 (Broughman, Swaim, & Hryczaniuk, 2011). This discrepancy of about 600 students may indicate vagaries of the estimation process, variations in the definitions used for each school type, students who were enrolled part-time or switched schools during the year, etc. Regardless, these figures indicate there were probably at most a few thousand independent homeschoolers in Alaska in 2010. The same year, according to our data (see McCracken & Coleman, this volume), there were 10,712 students enrolled in correspondence schools.

Freedom from government control is central to the identities of Alaska's independent homeschool groups. The Alaska Private and Home Educators Association, originally founded by Phelps in the 1980s, advertises itself as "a membership-based coalition of parents and others who have banded together to the furtherance of educational excellence through alternatives to the government-operated schools" (Alaska Private and Home Educators Association, 2020). Alaska Free Homeschoolers describes itself as "designed for the encouragement of Alaskan private homeschoolers who have resolved to remain free of state control in all manner possible, specifically by not accepting any state monies through the State of Alaska correspondence or charter programs" (Alaska Free Homeschoolers, 2004). These groups explicitly link their definition of homeschooling to the funding model.

While the number of families enrolled in correspondence programs appears to far exceed the number of independent homeschooling families, organizations that cater to these families continue to maintain an active membership. As of early 2019, the state-wide independent homeschool fan page affiliated with the national Home School Legal Defense Association had 908 likes on Facebook; other independent homeschool groups had 266 and 28 members, respectively (Alaska Private and Home Educators Association, 2011; Kenai Peninsula Christian Homeschoolers, 2011; Kenai Peninsula Independent Homeschoolers, 2015). While one online group which is limited to independent homeschooling families currently has only 83 members and posted one message in May 2018, when the group was founded in 2004 there were 555 messages posted during the month of May (Alaska Free Homeschoolers, 2004).

Meanwhile, most correspondence programs are vocal in considering the education they provide to be a form of homeschooling. "IDEA Homeschool is the

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largest and longest running Alaska homeschooling program,” IDEA’s website states (IDEA Homeschool, 2020). “We are a statewide, state-funded public homeschool program,” offers CyberLynx (CyberLynx, 2020a). Frontier Charter School promises potential enrollees its program will “increase academic opportunities & resources for your homeschool student” (Frontier Charter School, 2020). “Parents are considered the student’s primary instructors,” CyberLynx’s handbook reads. “We understand that parents who want to homeschool often know what methods and tools work best for their students” (CyberLynx, 2020b). As with other correspondence programs, parents who enroll in CyberLynx choose their children’s curriculum and submit quarterly work samples.

Understanding the history of Alaska’s correspondence schools is instructive when thinking about how we define homeschooling. Should homeschooling families be defined as those who opt out of government oversight and funding, as the signers of the 2003 anti-virtual school program insisted? How, then, should we categorize the Alaska correspondence programs’ decades-long use of public funding to purchase courses from Calvert Correspondence School, a privately developed, administered, and graded curriculum that is still used by homeschooling families today¹? Or is whether or not a family homeschools determined only by where a child is educated, as in the NCES’ definition? If so, Alaska’s correspondence students have always been homeschooled, even in mid-century when parents supervised their children’s instruction using curriculum designed by the state and graded by state employed teachers. (Families using CCS in the early 1980s clearly did view themselves as homeschooling, as evidenced by their submissions to John Holt’s magazine.) Is homeschooling instead defined according to each individual family? If so, the families who participate in Alaska’s correspondence programs today consider themselves to be homeschooling families, as do the correspondence programs who advertise to them. Or, perhaps, should homeschooling be understood as Griffith (2003) suggested, as parents “making decisions for themselves and taking control of their kids’ education”? If so, in wresting control of the state’s educational apparatus to create a new model of correspondence program that provided public funding for parent-directed education in the home, the Verhagans exemplified the modern homeschooling movement’s emphasis on parental investment.

¹ Known today as Calvert Education (Calvert Education, 2020).

Seen in any light, Alaska's correspondence programs embody the central impulses of homeschooling. As cyber charter schools and virtual public school programs continue to grow in number across the country, Alaska's enduring history of partnership between private families and public education officials should inform questions of who "counts" as homeschooled. While virtual public and charter schools may not meet every scholar and stakeholder's definition of homeschooling, we agree with Griffith that there is often little difference between the level of investment of parents who enroll their children in these programs and parents who are indisputably homeschooling.

Those who argue for an exclusive definition of homeschooling have attempted to use a variety of dividing lines to distinguish homeschooling from other forms of education. Purely legal definitions of homeschooling are clearly inadequate. Our examination of Alaska's correspondence schools demonstrates that an absence of government funding cannot be effectively used as a defining feature. Nor is parental control over curriculum a useful dividing line: there is little distinction between parents who educate their children at home in a virtual public or charter school, parents who purchase an all-inclusive homeschool curriculum package, and parents who use correspondence or online programs marketed explicitly to homeschooling families; all of these options require a large degree of parental supervision and investment in children's education in order to be successful. The fact that virtual public and charter schools offer support and instruction from a teacher is also not prohibitive; many homeschooling parents hire tutors, send their children to homeschooling co-ops or classes, or enroll them in "umbrella" schools. Even families' self-identification of their membership in the homeschooling community is problematic as a definitional characteristic, since the NCES data indicates that families using identical virtual programs may differ on whether they consider themselves to be homeschooling.

While the modern homeschooling movement may have begun as an act of political protest (Gaither, 2008), K-12 education outside of a traditional school has become simply one more option in an increasingly diverse climate of school choice. No essential quality has been proposed which can be used to productively exclude children who are educated in the home today from counting as homeschooled. The variation within homeschooling itself, which includes not only publicly funded options like Alaska's correspondence programs but also a large diversity in curricular choices, pedagogical practice, and outside supports, suggests that an

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expansive, inclusive definition of homeschooling may be the only logically tenable one.

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