

Home School Education in Mississippi As Perceived By District Superintendents

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ABSTRACT

As the United States of America continues to strive for excellence in education, administrators have witnessed through the years much change in the manner in which children of their districts obtain their scholastic instruction. Increasingly, educating children at home has again become a popular alternative to the traditional classroom setting. This article will discuss home schooling in the state of Mississippi as perceived by district superintendents.

Introduction

As the United States of America continues to strive for excellence in education, administrators have witnessed through the years much change in the manner in which children of their districts obtain their scholastic instruction. Increasingly, educating children at home has again become a popular alternative to the traditional classroom setting. Once an essential form of providing an education for the 90% of Americans who lived in villages in the early 1800's, home school education has again sparked the public's interest (Carlson, 1997). United States history is full of leaders educated from home, e.g. George Washington, Patrick Henry, John Quincy Adams, John Marshall, Robert E. Lee, Booker T. Washington, Thomas Edison, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Mark Twain, William Carey and Andrew Carnegie ("National Home," 2000).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which Mississippi school district superintendents are involved in the oversight of home education for their districts, including the presence or absence of local policies regulating home schools in their district. In addition, this study will examine superintendents' perceptions related to any need for revision of the Mississippi laws that govern home schooling.

Categories of Home School Parents

Van Galen (1988) divided home school parents in two groups: *idealologues* and *pedagogues* (as cited in Litcher & Schmidt, 1991). Idealologues educate at home to instill values into their children and strengthen the family bonds; while pedagogues home school to provide their children with an education superior to that which the public sector can provide. Pedagogues also include parents of special needs children. They home school because they feel as though the public schools cannot accommodate their child in a manner that would support maximum performance (as cited in Litcher & Schmidt).

Mayberry (1998) concurs with these two, but identifies a third category of home school parents. This category includes those families who home school for social reasons. They may be concerned with negative peer influence or just concerned that their child's social behavior is not compatible with the majority of students found in the public system, e.g. ADD or ADHD. In light of the tragedy of Columbine High School in the state of Colorado, this would also include those parents concerned with the overall safety of their child (Schnailberg, 1999).

These three categories define the parents of the more than 850,000 students who are being home schooled annually. With an estimated annual growth rate of 7%, this group of

children make up approximately 1.7% of the U.S. students ages 5 to 17 (Bielick, Chandler, & Broughman, 2001). Based on this growth, there could be more than three million children being home schooled by the year 2010 (Ray, 1999).

Home Schooling in Mississippi

The state of Mississippi has also witnessed a growing interest in home school education. The state's home school numbers have shown a slight increase over the last three years. Table 1 demonstrates the number of home schooled students in comparison with public school enrollment for the identified period. Interestingly, the number of children being home schooled has shown an increase from the beginning of the school year to the end for all three years.

Table 1

Enrollment Comparison of Home Schooled Students and Public School Students in the State of Mississippi

Reporting Period	Enrollment		
	Home School	Public School	Percent
September 1998	7,176	502,382	1.4
May 1999	8,768	492,894	1.3
September 1999	7,749	499,410	1.5
May 2000	10,053	489,588	2.0
September 2000	7,817	496,526	1.6
May 2001	10,271	487,379	2.1

Note. Public school enrollment numbers were provided by Management Information Systems at the Mississippi Department of Education. Home School enrollment numbers were provided by the Office of Compulsory Attendance Enforcement at the Mississippi Department of Education.

Michael Slavinski (2000) researched this growing home school movement, as it was perceived by the local superintendents in the state of Pennsylvania. Overall, the superintendents recognized a strong need for each district to develop formal board approved policies addressing

home school education. In addition, they opposed allowing home-schooled children to participate in athletics or other extracurricular activities. Overall, they stated that schools should receive some form of financial compensation if these students are to be included in public school activities. Otherwise, their participation presented a burden both administratively and financially on the school. But most importantly, the superintendents had an overwhelming concern for the academic achievement of children receiving their education at home. Without statewide testing, Pennsylvania could not ensure that the education children were receiving at home was adequate.

In the state of Mississippi, little information is available to state and local policy makers concerning the overall perception and concerns of the home school movement by district superintendents. With national numbers growing at an estimated 7% per year, policy makers need to be able to make decisions that are both informed and in the best interest of the children they serve. District superintendents will play a key role in providing policy makers with this information that will be based upon their expertise and day-to-day experiences with the home-schoolers in their district. Hence, the purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which Mississippi school district superintendents are involved in the oversight of home education for their districts, including the presence or absence of local policies regulating home schools in their district. In addition, this study will examine superintendents' perceptions related to any need for revision of the Mississippi laws that govern home schooling.

Population

The population surveyed consisted of the 149 superintendents representing the public school districts throughout the state of Mississippi during the 2002-2003 school year. The three agricultural districts were excluded from this research due to the overlapping of district lines. Survey research was used to solicit information from the superintendents regarding their experience and perceptions related to home school education both in their districts and statewide. The questions used to collect this data were derived from a review of literature and prior research material. Five categories were examined through the use of this survey. They were:

1. Background information on superintendents and district
2. Superintendent's insight regarding home school education in district
3. Part time enrollment policies
4. Reasons for increase in home school enrollment
5. Changes in statutes

With the assistance of the Mississippi Department of Education, a list of the superintendents was compiled. To increase participant response rate and interest, the researcher

contacted via telephone each district to discuss with the superintendent the research and solicit support. The researcher spoke with ninety-four superintendents with the remaining fifty-five being unavailable on at least two calling attempts. Those not available were also faxed the survey accompanied with a cover letter describing the purpose of the research and offering an opportunity to receive a summary of statewide findings, if desired. Ninety-four of the 149 district superintendents returned their surveys; thus, the response rate was 63%. The returned surveys were from both the contacted superintendents as well as those who were not available via telephone.

Methodology

The researcher applied the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows computer software and used frequency distributions throughout the research to analyze the data. Tables and figures were used to demonstrate the data solicited from the survey. In addition, the researcher used a point-biserial correlation analysis to determine whether a relationship existed between district size and the presence or absence of a part time enrollment policy.

Findings

The following paragraphs provide a discussion of the findings based on the research questions in this study.

In May 2001, approximately 2.06% of school age children in the state of Mississippi were reported as being home schooled ("Mississippi Department," 2001b; Peterson, 2001). This was approximately a .05% increase in the number of children from the previous school year ("Mississippi Department," 2000; Peterson, 2000). However, this number includes only those home-schooled students whose parents have completed the required certificate of enrollment form, which is the only requirement that the state of Mississippi currently has concerning home school education ("Compulsory School Attendance"). Of the ninety-four superintendents who responded to the survey, 34% indicated that they had no confidence that the certificate of enrollment was completed on all of the children being home schooled in their district. Thus, the estimated number of Mississippi children receiving their education at home may be even higher.

Likewise, with no further requirements for children being home schooled, superintendents' satisfaction level with the quality of education was low. Three-fourths (76.6%) of the superintendents indicated that they do not have any confidence that these children are receiving an education equivalent to that provided by the public schools. Approximately 58.5% of the superintendents stated that they were notified when a child withdraws from the system; 39.4% were not notified. Of those who were notified, 58.2% initiated contact with the family while the remaining 41.8% did not. Hence, these numbers do not support consistent interaction

and follow up with these families to determine their reasons for withdrawing by the school districts statewide.

In a study conducted in 1999, the National Center for Education Statistics concurred with Ray's (1999) research identifying "the parents' belief that they could provide a better education at home" as the leading reason for home school education nationwide. Further, the National Center for Education Statistics also revealed in their study that the second leading reason was related to religion. In addition to these two reasons, Ray identified school safety and violence as also being prompting factors in parents' decision to home school.

In examining perceived reasons within the state of Mississippi, superintendents' perceptions as to why parents choose to home school differed with respect to their individual districts and statewide. Superintendents did not identify any of the listed reasons as playing a major factor in parents choosing to home school within their individual districts. However, superintendents perceived integration/segregation/racial discrimination as a major factor in parents' decision to home school statewide.

The State of Mississippi is one of only eight states that regulates home school education in only one category, the filing of a certificate of enrollment. When surveyed, Mississippi superintendents recommended revising state laws governing home schooling to address six additional areas. Those areas were identified as subjects to be taught, statewide testing, instructor qualifications, record keeping, a minimum number of instruction days and a minimum number of instructional hours. Two of these areas have recently been introduced in the state's legislature for consideration. The establishment of a record keeping system to document student's progress was introduced for consideration during the 2001 regular legislative session and died in committee. In addition, statewide testing, to include home-schooled students was brought up and also died in committee during both the 2000 regular session and the 2001 regular session. Therefore, it can be concluded that the state's legislators have not yet determined the need to revise laws regulating home school education within the state.

In 1995, the Attorney General's office for the state of Mississippi addressed part time enrollment stating that acceptance or denial rests with the local school boards and should be based upon a developed policy (Clinton, 1995). Of the responding superintendents, 89% indicated their district does not have a written policy concerning part time enrollment. Of this percentage, approximately three fourths (74%) indicated that their district's practice is to deny requests for part time enrollment. In examining whether the lack of funding from the state for inclusion of these students related to denial of requests, it was found that superintendents disagreed that the districts should be reimbursed for part time enrollment costs. Therefore, it may be concluded that the lack of state funding did not appear to be directly related to the denial of part time enrollment. Further, the results of a point biserial correlation determined that district size was not related to the presence or absence of a written policy.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, with the national home schooling numbers showing a dramatic increase annually, understanding fully the holistic impact this form of education is going to have on

public education and our society is imperative. Whether inclusion or exemption from state control is the answer, this and other research offers a better understanding for policy makers and board representatives who make decisions that will impact the children of our future. Without this input from our district superintendents, those advocating for education, whether it is nationally, state or even locally will continue to make blind decisions. Ultimately, as a nation, we could witness the children of our future failing to be prepared for what the 21st century holds.

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