

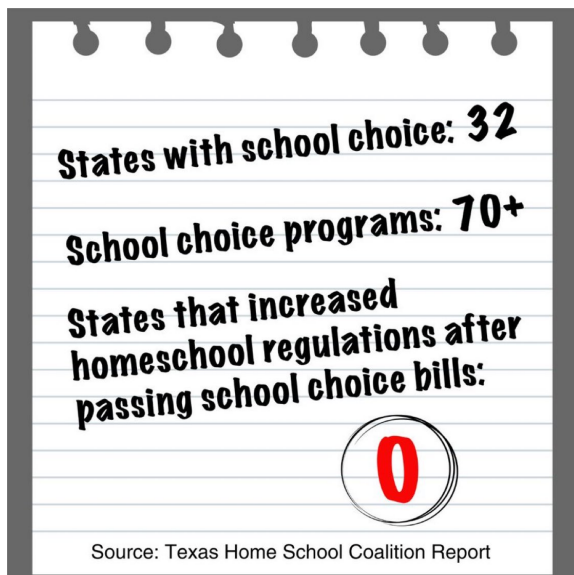
The Impact of Vouchers on Homeschooling Communities

In our neighboring state of Texas, there is an ongoing debate over whether they should pass their school voucher program, called SB2. There are a lot of arguments for and against vouchers in general, but I'm not going to focus on those. I am concerned with vouchers *for homeschoolers* and how they affect homeschooling communities. This is important for homeschoolers in Oklahoma because I continually see the arguments from Texas leaking over into discussions here in Oklahoma.

In a surprise move, the Texas Homeschool Coalition (THSC) came out in support of vouchers for homeschoolers. Historically, homeschoolers have been against receiving any government funds because we believe government funds eventually lead to government strings. However, THSC recently conducted a study that says that our fears are entirely misplaced, if not backwards. In fact, they have gone so far as to claim that, if anything, vouchers have *increased* freedoms for homeschoolers.

Because this study (and THSCs promotion of it) is spreading around the Internet, I felt the need to do an in-depth examination of what the study actually studied and what its findings were and whether or not they are supported by the data.

The claim that THSC is making is this—that they have a study that says that 32 states have school choice (voucher) programs, and that zero states increased their homeschooling regulations after passing these bills. The graphic below is what they are sharing.



The paper itself is titled, "Homeschool Regulatory Changes: Do Adjacent Policy Changes Matter?" Now, the first red flags are (a) the title of the paper, and (b) where it is posted. First of all, the title alludes to "adjacent policy changes." Note that, as we dig in, we will see that it is not even talking about *direct* policy changes about homeschooling, but *adjacent* ones. Second, it is posted at SSRN. There's nothing wrong with SSRN per se, but the fact is that

SSRN is a “preprint” service, which means that SSRN themselves do not peer review the papers. Oftentimes, authors will post papers to SSRN that they have *also* published in a peer reviewed journal, but if a paper is *only* at SSRN that means it is not peer reviewed. Note that the primary author has indeed published many peer-reviewed papers, but this is not one of them. That means that it has not undergone the same academic scrutiny that typical academic papers undergo. That doesn’t make it wrong, but it might mean that academic journals agree with us—there just isn’t much of substance that the paper is saying.

So let’s get into the details.

Which Programs are Analyzed

First of all, let’s look at what the authors are specifically analyzing. First is “public access” laws. These are laws that give non-public school children access to public resources such as playgrounds or sports teams. I did not analyze these because they frankly aren’t relevant to a discussion of whether or not receiving money from the government will impact homeschooling freedom. The question of the effects of whether or not a homeschool student can play in an already-constructed public playground is completely different than the effects of homeschool students receiving money. While some members of THSC (and the authors of the study) think that access laws are relevant to this discussion, I frankly don’t see it.

The big problem with this study is that it groups all “voucher programs” as if they are exactly the same program. In fact, the study even includes voucher programs *that don’t include homeschooling* as part of their study data! From the paper:

In this study, we count the total number of programs by year and then similarly group them every five years as described in the access section. **This measure includes all programs, whether they benefit homeschooled students or not.**

(Pg. 7, emphasis added)

So, when THSC claims that 32 states have voucher programs and this doesn’t impact homeschooling freedoms, they are including in that number *voucher programs that have nothing to do with homeschooling!*

What Counts as a “Homeschool Regulation”

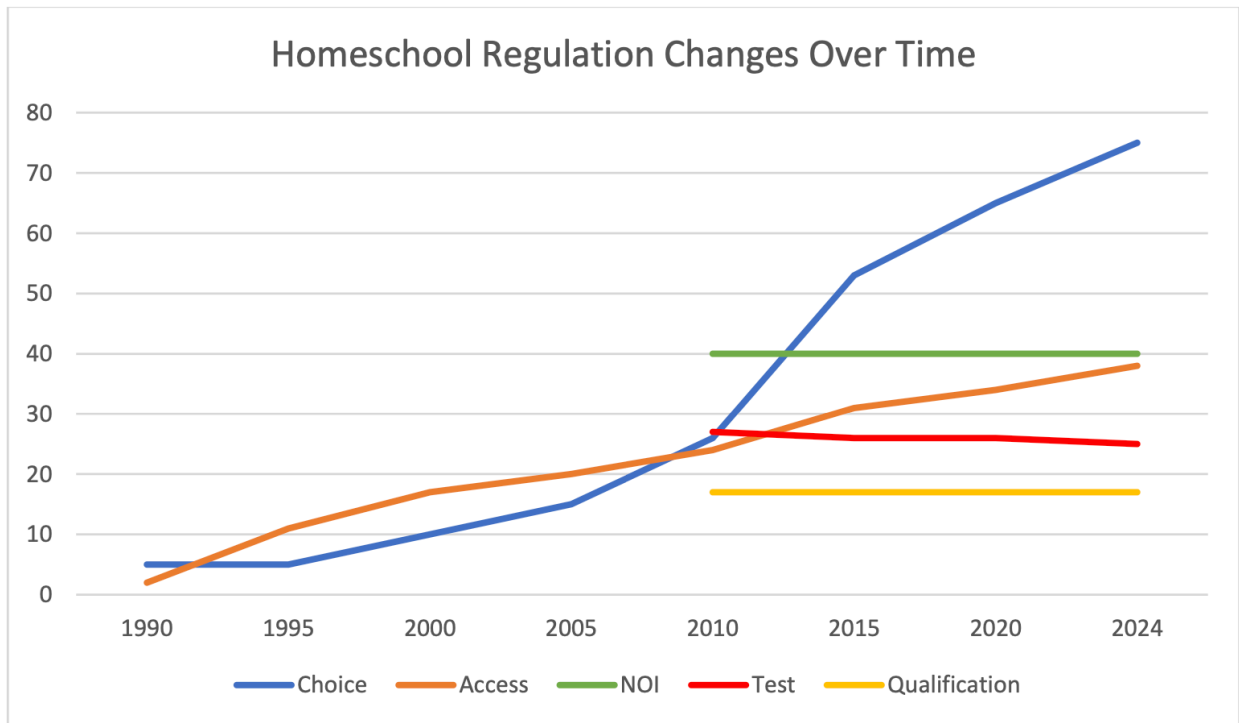
The next big issue with the paper is that it is *extremely limited* in what it counts as a “homeschool regulation.” The paper literally only counted three things for its metrics regarding homeschool regulation: (1) notice of intent, (2) testing requirements, and (3) parental qualifications. Additionally, these metrics were simply marked as “present/not-present”, with no attempt to quantify their degree. They did not include **any other aspect** as being part of “homeschool regulation.” They did not consider, for instance, restrictions on curriculum as part of “homeschool regulation.” They did not consider background checks as part of “homeschool regulation.” They did not consider vaccine mandates as part of “homeschool regulation.”

Additionally, they only considered specific laws. They did not consider other types of regulation such as regulations or policies that were issued as part of an established educational authority, DHS, or CPS if it did not involve a change in law. According to the study, “we also only count changes to laws” (pg. 6).

So, the study is completely ignoring a large part of what most people consider “homeschooling regulations.”

Which States are Decreasing Regulation

The study’s main results is the chart, “Homeschooling Regulation Changes Over time” (page 9). The graph is largely unlabeled, and, once you realize what the Y-axis refers to, it is obvious that the graph is meaningless. The graph is reproduced below:



The X-axis is obviously the year. The Y access for “choice” is the number of “school choice” (i.e., voucher) programs available. Notice that since a state can have more than one voucher program, this value goes well above 50 even though many states do not have a voucher program.

For the other lines - NOI (Notice of Intent), Test (Testing Requirements), and Qualification (Parental Qualification Requirements), the Y-axis is merely **the number of states which have such a requirement**. This counts *all* states, **whether or not they have a school choice program**.

So, what the graph is showing is that the total number of states with these requirements are going down as the total number of states with school choice programs is going up **whether or not this is even happening in the same state!**

In other words, if state A adds a voucher program (whether or not it includes homeschoolers) while state B fights to decrease regulations (while not having a voucher program), then this paper is claiming that A’s voucher program is causing B’s regulations to decrease. That is the type of inference they are drawing from this graph.

Limited vs Universal Voucher Programs

We should also note that there is a big difference between the effects of limited and targeted voucher programs and widespread voucher programs on public policy. Most people recognize that special needs kids have, well, special needs, and may need more flexibility with those funds. Thus, many of the voucher programs that, according to the study, don't impact homeschooling freedom, are this way because the affected population is limited and they don't have a lot of other options. The Florida voucher program is often touted as one which helps homeschoolers without impacting homeschool freedom, but it is mostly just for special needs students.

Likewise, many people will say that Arizona has had vouchers for homeschoolers for "decades" without impacting homeschooling freedom. Again, while they introduced a widespread program in 2022, they have only had vouchers for "decades" for very specialized populations—originally focused on special needs and military families. People are generally pretty willing to give specialized populations a lot more free reign over what happens because it is much easier than trying to retrofit the system to accommodate their needs. But the policy effects of these sorts of limited systems don't generalize to the large-scale systems.

It is only in the last three years that widespread vouchers (so-called "universal" programs) have even been tried. And the picture isn't as rosy as people think.

What is Really Happening on the Ground

So, as is evident, this study doesn't actually include any metrics relevant to the question. Its count of regulations is woefully limited. Its count of voucher programs includes those that have nothing to do with homeschooling. Its vision of cause-effect relationships is just logically flawed. So, rather than dealing with distracting non-evidence, let's look at what is happening on-the-ground in states with more widespread voucher programs.

In Oklahoma, we established a large-scale (though not quite "universal") voucher program that applied (in a limited way) to homeschoolers in 2023. It is listed as a "tax credit" but it is operated as a voucher system. For homeschoolers the payout was only \$1,000, and the vast majority of homeschooling families did not take the credit.

Nonetheless, in *every single legislative session since*, there have been bills introduced to oppressively regulate homeschoolers because of this. Additionally, the bills introduced don't even limit themselves to those who tax the tax credit. Talking with legislators, these bills have come up because they are concerned that people will pretend to homeschool to take advantage of the system. These measures have included things like requiring homeschooling families to list every single adult that interacts with our children and subject them to twice-yearly DHS background checks. While we have always had to be diligent in defending homeschooling freedom, this level of draconian regulation had never been suggested before, and now we are running into it every year. Other states have reported the same thing.

Yes, we are largely winning so far. But, contrary to the claims of the study, the voucher programs have made that job a lot harder, and that is even with these programs being brand new. So, if your regulations have gone down, thank your state organizations, not the voucher programs.

Additionally, the money itself comes with strings. You might say that, "if you don't want the strings, don't take the money," but the fact is that most homeschooling involves co-ops or other groups of homeschoolers. Thus, if *any* homeschooler in the group takes the money, the

strings wind up applying to all of them (for more details and examples on how “free money” hurts you even if you don’t personally take it, see [this article](#)).

And this money has come with all sorts of regulations. The Arizona ESA, for instance, requires that you submit your curriculum to [even receive money for paper and pencils](#). Your student also has to follow the public school vaccination requirements. Additionally, the governor of that state (Katie Hobbs) is trying to force students to go to public school first before being able to receive the voucher. And Arizona’s voucher system has only been in place for three years and is considered the model for these sorts of systems.

Where we have more long-term data is from other countries. And, in those countries, school vouchers have led to the takeover of *all* education by the state. For instance, Sweden, which has long been an icon of school choice advocates, has recently used their position as school funder to start cracking down on [religious schools](#), forcing them to educate in a secular manner, and segregate educational activities from religious ones (see [here](#) and [here](#), by translation, specifically the section titled “Other Questions About Activities with a Denominational Focus”). School choice in Sweden may have started as a good idea, but today it just means that the state runs private education as much as it does public education.

In the United States, it is only in the last three years that widespread voucher programs have even been tried, and they are already inviting heavy restrictions on homeschooling. It is technically true that these regulations could appear even if homeschoolers don’t get money. However, in the words of the Homeschool Legal Defense Association, “On principle, homeschooling has succeeded as a movement in part by being different. Unlike typical constituencies asking for our piece of the public-money pie, we have simply asked the federal government to leave us alone. This has fostered one of the most dynamic social movements of our lifetime.” (see also [this podcast episode](#) from HSLDA)

It isn’t our contention that problems and regulation will necessarily arise immediately (your state organizations are actively fighting against it), but taking money dramatically changes the dynamic of the relationship between homeschoolers and the state in the minds of both the public and legislators.

A Short Note on Academic Studies

When presented with criticisms of the study, many voucher advocates have stated that, “of course an academic study has limitations, that’s the nature of academics.” While technically true, a study is only helpful if its limitations align with real-world questions. In this case, even if you don’t view the study itself as problematic, the fact is that it is so limited that there are literally no conclusions about voucher programs that you could draw from it, except maybe “limited voucher programs that don’t go to homeschoolers don’t affect a few very specific types of homeschooling laws.” Okay, sure, but that’s not what THSC is claiming about this study. The fact is that this study contains basically no actionable information whatsoever, and anyone claiming otherwise is misleading you.

Conclusion

In short, it is telling that THSC is using such a flawed study as the foundation stone for their support of school vouchers for homeschoolers. We believe that the dynamic of continually increasing homeschool freedom has occurred precisely because we are the one constituency that doesn’t ask for money from the state. It may not happen immediately, but changing this dynamic sets up our communities for long-term regulation from state authorities. Conducting and authoring unsound studies doesn’t change this.

Please listen to HSLDA and the other leaders that have fought hard to ensure that homeschoolers have freedom in the United States. This wasn't always the case, and the people who had the talks with the legislators, who argued the cases in court, and convinced the public that we are offering something worthwhile are the ones who are telling you that including homeschoolers in these voucher bills is a bad idea.