

Hybrid homeschools: Organization, regulatory environments and reactions to COVID-19

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Abstract: This study reports the results of a survey conducted with a set of “hybrid homeschool” leaders (principals or directors) from around the United States who were asked to describe 1. how their families categorize themselves (as homeschoolers, or as members of private schools), 2. the ways in which their schools operate in terms of scheduling, hiring, etc., 3. how their schools are regulated in the various states, and how they work within those regulatory frameworks, and 4. how they were affected by COVID-19, both in the spring of 2020 and the fall of 2020. Respondents provided a variety of names to describe their schools and a split in how families see themselves. In terms of staffing, schedules, tuition, and similar issues, the schools provide several arrangements, within some consistent constraints. Respondents noted a variety of regulatory situations in their respective states, but none felt overburdened. Neither did any respondents point out particular problems that required regulatory relief. Regarding COVID-19, most schools reported feeling much less disruption compared to nearby conventional (5-day per week) schools.

Key words: homeschooling, school choice, education policy, COVID-19

Introduction

While still enrolling most students in the U.S., the conventional schooling model of 5 full days per week in a standardized classroom setting is being challenged in a variety of ways. A variety of alternative schooling methods have been on the rise in recent years, in response to demand for smaller

schools, smaller classes, and more personalized learning experiences (EdChoice, 2020a). As a result, a number of creative schooling models now exist that do not fit neatly into conventional boxes. “Micro schools” – school models which are sometimes considered “the reimagining of the one-room schoolhouse, where class sizes are usually fewer than 15 students of varying ages, and the schedule and curriculum is tailored to fit the needs of each class” are becoming more common (EdChoice, 2020a). In describing these schools, Horn (2015) writes, “As of yet, there is no common definition that covers all these schools, which vary not only by size and cost but also in their education philosophies and operating models. Think one-room schoolhouse meets blended learning and home schooling meets private schooling.” New entrants of this type, like Prenda, Acton Academies, and many others look much different from both conventional 5-days-per-week schools and from homeschooling. In response to COVID-19, this rise in new models has accelerated, with parents seeking even more ad hoc, bespoke arrangements this school year (Horn, 2020). Public school systems themselves have attempted to adjust to the situation this year in a variety of creative ways as well (Miller, 2020).

One particular form of schooling that perfectly fits these trends is “hybrid homeschools” (Wearne, 2020a, 2016; McShane, 2021; EdChoice, 2020a). These are schools in which students attend classes for several days per week, and are homeschooled on the other days. They may be public (state-funded) or private institutions, though currently most are private. Their numbers are growing, though this model has been in use for nearly 30 years (UMSI, n.d.). Hybrid homeschools often have one or at most a few full time administrators, rather than a large full-time staff; teachers and most administrators are typically part-time, and tuition is lower than at nearby conventional/five-day schools. But these are not ad hoc arrangements. Students are often formally enrolled as students at these schools, even if they only spend a minority of the week on campus; these hybrid homeschools might be considered more formalized, structured versions of homeschool co-ops. Importantly, hybrid homeschools as they are discussed in this study, are not online schools (though they may use technology on home days). Nor are they “hybrid” in the sense some U.S. schools have operated after COVID-19, in which some students in the same class are live in a classroom and others are watching class simultaneously online. The defining characteristics of these schools are that most or all of the curriculum is decided by the school, students attend live classes (usually) 2-3 days per week in a physical building, and are “homeschooled” the rest of the week.

Because of their recent growth and because of the variety of forms hybrid homeschools are taking, state-level policymakers have struggled with how to treat them in terms of policymaking and regulation. In many cases, this situation may be what the schools desire; hybrid homeschools are often considered an example of “permissionless innovation” (Thierer, 2016), perhaps somewhat similar to the many small schools found around the world by Tooley (2013). “Permissionless innovation,” as defined by Thierer (2014), “refers to the notion that experimentation with new technologies and business models should generally be permitted by default.” This is in opposition to the “precautionary principle” by which many state-level regulators operate, and which Thierer defines as “belief that new innovations should be curtailed or disallowed until their developers can prove that they will not cause any harms to individuals, groups, specific entities, cultural norms, or various existing laws, norms, or traditions.”

Hybrid homeschool founders often appreciate the fact that they can start these schools with minimal legal, financial, or political struggles, which is not the case with other types of startup schools in the U.S. such as charter schools or many private schools. Hybrid homeschools need not seek the same array of government approvals as a startup charter school would, and they need not raise nearly as much funding as a startup conventional private school would, for example. Hybrid homeschools are typically not required to seek formal permission to operate from any educational entity, or to seek accreditation.

In some cases, this uncertainty on the part of their regulators is to the schools’ detriment, as when their students are not clearly eligible for certain state or local programs, such as state-level college scholarships for high school graduates (GAfutures, n.d.). As just one example of the regulatory ambiguity under which these schools operate, some of these schools require their students to register with their states as homeschoolers; others consider students to be enrolled in a private school. Occasionally schools themselves are able to make this distinction. Some individual schools require some of their students to register as homeschoolers and not others, depending on the students’ grade levels.

This study seeks to describe these schools’ self-conceptions and the regulatory environment in which hybrid homeschools operate, from the schools’ perspective. These schools seem to exist in a sort of regulatory gray area – they are not quite seen as homeschools, but not quite as conventional private schools either. Because they are not nearly as numerous as other

kinds of private schools or as public schools, they tend to be overlooked by state regulators. Their independence also gave them a unique position during the onset of COVID-19. In order to better understand these schools' self-conceptions, operations, regulatory situations, and responses to COVID-19, this paper sets out to ask four specific research questions:

- How do families at these hybrid homeschools see themselves – as groups of homeschoolers, as members of private schools, or as something else?
- How are these hybrid homeschools organized, practically, in terms of staffing, accreditation, tuition, and similar factors?
- How are these schools regulated by their states, and what are their opinions about their current regulatory structures?
- How were these hybrid homeschools affected by COVID-19?

Research on Hybrid Homeschools and Homeschooling

Hybrid homeschools

While homeschool co-ops have existed for several decades, and while state laws may have permitted them for a long time, the oldest functional hybrid homeschools in the sense this paper describes them likely date from the early 1990s (UMSI, n.d.). The actual study of hybrid homeschools is an even newer endeavor (Wearne, 2016). What the extant research has found is that the families who choose hybrid homeschools tend to be above average in terms of income and education level, and the schools tend to be a mostly suburban phenomenon (Wearne, 2020a). Though these schools tend to operate 2-3 days per week in person and 2-3 days per week at home, there is variety in the schools' scheduling, hiring practices, self-conceptions, and other aspects, which have not been documented in detail before and will be explored in this report.

It is important to note that the word "hybrid" has had multiple uses in the context of schools. In the past, "hybrid" learning often meant some form of online learning. During COVID-19, the word "hybrid" came to mean some students learning in the classroom while others learned virtually. "Hybrid" as used in the term "hybrid homeschools" is intended to capture the mix of in-school and at-home learning that occurs on different days. It is a term that many of the families and educators involved with these schools use, or at least recognize. The terminology of these schools is an area of study in this paper and will be discussed below.

Homeschooling

The magnitude of the growth of homeschooling itself in the U.S. is somewhat contested in recent years, but as a form of school choice, it has a much more established regulatory and legal history (Watson, 2018; Gaither, 2017). While some authors find a slowing of homeschool growth in recent years (Wang, Rathburn, & Musu, 2019), Ray (2018) and Watson (2018) find a continuing increase in homeschool enrollment. Families' responses to COVID-19 may be supporting another increase in homeschooling, or at least families' receptiveness to it, though that receptiveness may be waning (Ed-Choice 2020b).

Though legal in every state in the U.S., in practical terms, homeschooling regulation varies widely among states. According to Carlson (2020), "State-to-state variability in homeschooling regulations cannot be overstated. These regulations affect many aspects of homeschooling—from what is taught to who may teach it, from filing notice to reporting progress, from seeking special education services to participating in extracurricular activities, and from documenting achievement to assessment practices" (p. 11).

The fact of this regulatory variation even among homeschoolers has implications for hybrid homeschoolers. In their discussion of the evolving nature of homeschooling, Kunzman and Gaither (2020) write that "the lines between public and private, home and school, continue to blur" (p. 293). Regulators are of various opinions regarding how to regulate full time homeschoolers (Bartholet, 2020; McDonald, 2019); this is even more the case for hybrid homeschoolers, if state regulators are aware of these schools at all. The proper form or level of regulation is not a topic of this paper, though some suggestions for issues for states to consider will be provided. In practice, this survey finds that different states currently treat these students as homeschoolers, as private school students, and as other special cases.

Methods

Survey and Response Rate

To collect the data for this project, an electronic survey consisting of 24 questions was sent to school leaders of hybrid homeschools in multiple U.S. states. The survey was designed and the data stored and analyzed using the Qualtrics survey software program. A pilot of the survey instrument itself was conducted three months prior to the actual survey. The pilot was sent to ten hybrid homeschool administrators for response and feedback. After incorporating the pilot participants' feedback on the survey questions, the

sample was sent to hybrid homeschool principals/directors around the U.S. with an invitation to participate. Reminder messages were sent weekly during the month-long survey window in the fall of 2020.

The sample for this survey was drawn from an ongoing database project which seeks to locate hybrid homeschools around the U.S., which currently includes slightly over 200 schools. For this survey, every state in which at least three schools were located was considered (a total of 21 states). From this set, 2/3 of the schools were randomly selected, allowing for more anonymity in responses (though not complete anonymity, as respondents were required to identify their states). After eliminating email bouncebacks, this resulted in 107 schools receiving initial recruitment emails. Included schools offer a variety of grade combinations (K-8, K-12, etc.). Three reminder emails were sent during the month-long survey window. A total of 27 schools from 12 different states responded, for a response rate of 25.2 percent. These states included:

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- Colorado
- Florida
- Georgia
- Mississippi
- New York
- North Carolina
- South Carolina
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Virginia

The 27 schools responding to the survey, represent a variety of grade bands (K-8, K-12, etc.), and most were located in the South or in Texas. This area of the country is where most hybrid homeschools tend to be located. Schools from the Northeast and mountain West, however, also responded and are included in the results.

Limitations

The work to locate hybrid homeschools and to build the database from which this sample was taken is an ongoing project; certainly there are more schools in existence than have been located so far, especially small, private

independent schools which are not connected to any of the larger national networks. Only selecting from states with three or more schools reduced the potential sample size, but it also helped to preserve schools' anonymity when responding. The results of this study are descriptive in nature and not necessarily generalizable to the full universe of American hybrid homeschools. Identifying appropriate schools for the dataset has become more difficult in 2020-21, as many public school systems have begun using the term "hybrid" learning to mean a variety of situations, such as portions of a class coming in on alternating days, or a combination of live and online students in the same classes. Neither of these examples fits the definition of "hybrid homeschools" as noted above, and so ongoing growth of the database will require even more in-depth, qualitative research into school operations to identify candidate hybrid homeschools for the database.

Results

The purposes of this study are to learn how hybrid homeschools conceptualize themselves and operate in normal times, and how are they regulated by their states. Another purpose is to learn how they adjusted to the special circumstances of COVID-19. Findings from the survey are divided into four sections below, based on the four research questions:

- How do families at these hybrid homeschools see themselves – as groups of homeschoolers, as members of private schools, or as something else?
- How are these hybrid homeschools organized, practically, in terms of staffing, accreditation, tuition, and similar factors?
- How are these schools regulated by their states, and what are their opinions about their current regulatory structures?
- How were these hybrid homeschools affected by COVID-19?

How Do These Schools See Themselves?

Names

One contested question is what to call these entities. "Hybrid homeschools" is something of a term of art, but one which most people working with these schools tend to understand and/or use themselves – the "hybridity" comes from the combination of homeschool and in-school learning settings.

Participants were therefore asked to choose from a list of commonly-used ways to describe their school, or to provide their own description. Results are shown in Figure 1.

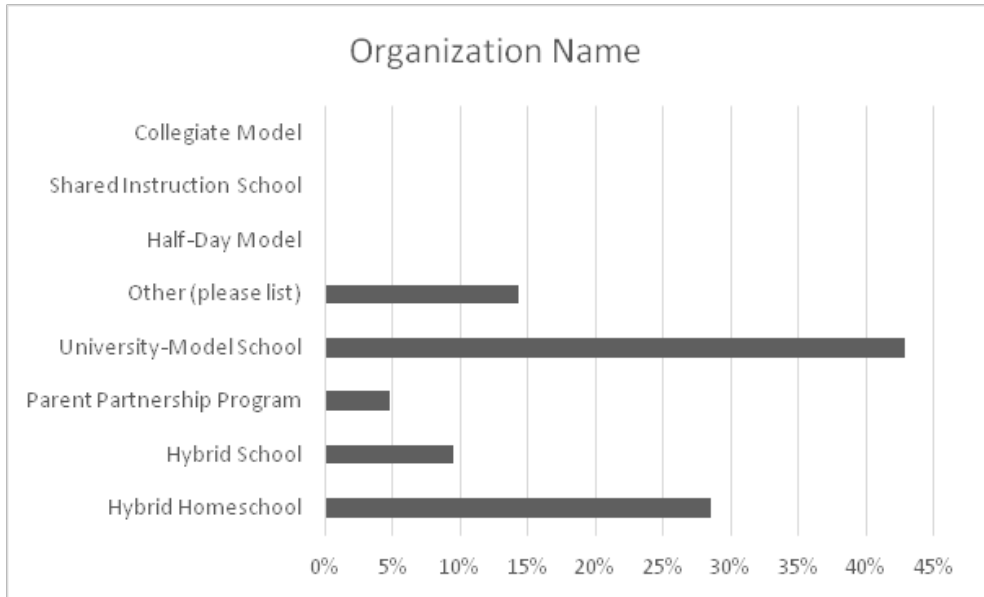


Figure 1: Respondents' Self-Descriptions

“Other” titles included “hybrid education center,” “collaborative model,” and “homeschool tutorial.” “University-Model School,” the most common response, is the name of a national network to which several of the sample schools belong.

Families' Self-Identification

Hybrid homeschool leaders were also asked how they thought their schools' families considered themselves: as “homeschoolers” or as members of a private (non-public) school, regardless of how their students are formally registered with their states (registration requirements will be discussed below). School leaders' responses are reported in Figure 2.

A plurality of families, then, according to school leaders, would consider themselves to be homeschoolers, and an outright majority would consider themselves to be members of a private school. A number of school leaders reported their families believing both simultaneously, which accords with past interviews done with parents and administrators at this type of school (Wearne, 2019). This makes sense, as families come to these schools from

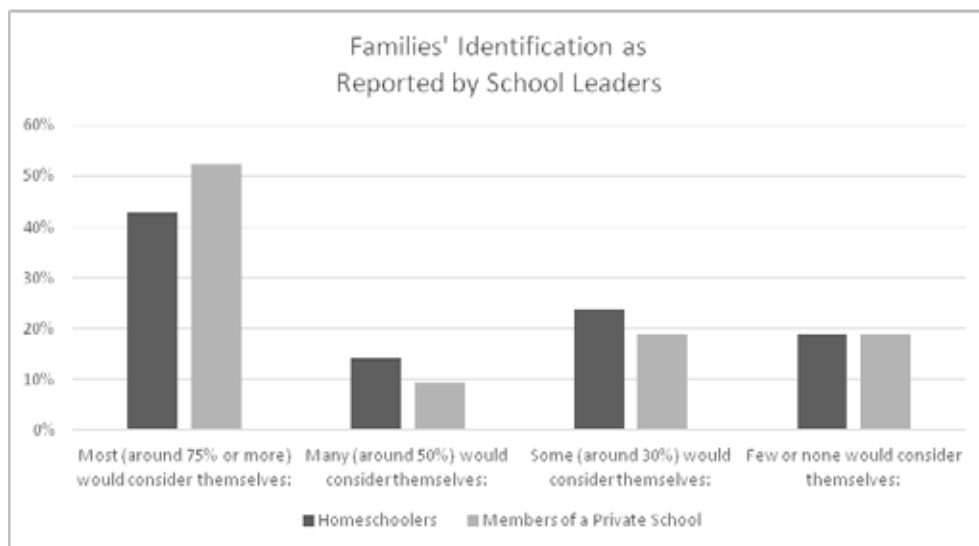


Figure 2: Families' Identification as Reported by School Leaders

a variety of other settings – full time public or private schools, or from full time homeschooling (Wearne 2020a). Some school leaders believe the mix of families will change over time. For example, one school leader in a separate interview stated that his school originally drew mostly homeschoolers, but over time, was attracting more families whose main experiences were with full time conventional private or public schools (Wearne, 2020, pp. 48-49).

How Do These Schools Operate?

School Logistics: Enrollments, Tuitions, and Schedules

Just over half of the schools responding (52 percent) are private independent schools; the rest reported being members of one of the larger national networks of hybrid homeschools (University-Model Schools, Regina Caeli Academies, Aquinas Learning Centers, or Artios Academies).

In terms of enrollment, responding schools had an average of 209 students in 2019-20, and an average of 214 students in 2020-21, with most schools reporting increases (three reported declines and one reported closing for the 2020-21 school year entirely).

The average tuition reported by these schools for 2019-20 and 2020-21 combined was \$4,642, with a low of \$1,250 per year, and a high of \$10,500. Most schools reported either a slight increase in tuition or no change from

2019-20 to 2020-21. The lone exception was the one school charging \$10,500 in 2019-20, which reduced its tuition to \$7,700 for 2020-21.

Regarding schedules, students often attend these schools 2 or 3 days per week, but there is wide variation. Responses about their weekly schedules are reported in Figure 3.

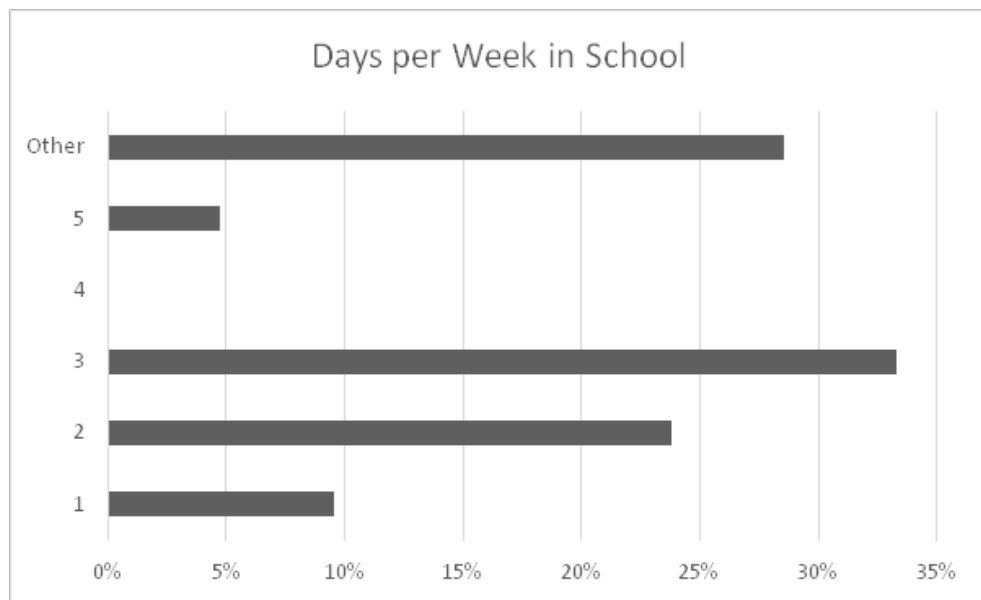


Figure 3: Days per Week in School

Students attending schools five days are rare, and these students are not there for a “full day” any day of the week. Those answering “Other” all stated that the number of days (between two and four in all cases) depended on students’ grade levels, with older students attending school more days than younger students.

School Logistics: Staffing, Standardized Testing, and Accreditation

Given the relatively low tuitions and less than 5 days per week in their schedule, these schools also have reduced staffing levels. The survey asked school leaders to identify the number of full-time employees at their schools. Two-thirds of these schools reported having 3 or fewer full-time employees. Only 14 percent reported having more than five full-time employees. These results are reported in Figure 4.

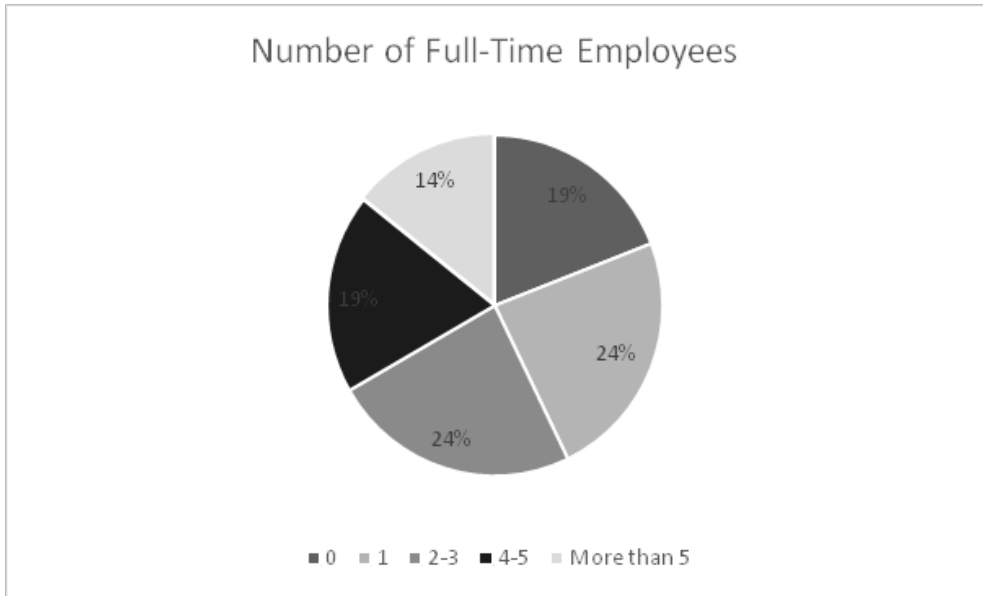


Figure 4: Number of Full-Time Employees

In terms of teacher hiring, the survey asked for minimum teacher requirements. Accreditors typically require some credential (such as a Bachelor's degree), and some coursework in education and/or the subject area(s) taught. Accreditation is not required by all state laws, however, and so unaccredited schools would face fewer constraints in teacher hiring. Schools reported various requirements including: Membership in a particular religious denomination (17 percent), State certification (20 percent), Bachelor's degree in the subject area taught (33 percent), Bachelor's degree in any subject area (3 percent), or Other (27 percent).

“Other” answers included, for example:

- “The Director is required to have a [state] teaching license and certification in the areas taught.”
- “Affirming statement of faith.”
- “They must be Christians who sign our statement of faith; but we are not affiliated with a denomination.”

Just under 61 percent of responding schools reported being accredited by some state-approved body. Provided a list of possible reasons for accreditation, school leaders gave a variety of reasons for seeking it including: Intrinsic value of accreditation (31 percent), Marketing value (28 percent), State college scholarship opportunities (21 percent), Athletics or extracurricular

reasons (15 percent), Required by the state (3 percent), Other (3 percent). Few school leaders reported accreditation as a state requirement, and the only additional open-ended answer to this question was that the leaders of one particular school “do not feel it [accreditation] is necessary for high school graduation.”

Finally, every school but one reported offering some kind of standardized testing. Some of the schools noted they offered a few tests as options for interested families (but they did not require such testing). Test listed by the schools include college preparatory assessments (AP exams, PSAT, SAT, the Classic Learning Test), reading skills assessments (DIBELS), and common norm-referenced assessments used in many schools (COGAT, ITBS, Terra Nova), among others.

How Are These Schools Regulated?

Regulation: Homeschools vs. Private Schools

Though these schools may operate in similar ways in the various states, those states view them quite differently (as do the families themselves, which will be discussed below). When asked whether their families register with their respective states as homeschool families or as private school families, answers were split: 43 percent have their families register as homeschoolers, and 48 percent as private school students, with five percent reporting that “It depends on the student’s grade level,” and another 5 percent reporting that “Individual students may choose how to register” in their state(s).

Though the form of registration is split almost evenly, the reason families register the way they do is typically because of state requirements. 95 percent of respondents reported that “Our families are required to register this way,” while the other 5 percent reported that “Our families have a choice as to how they are registered with the state.” This suggests that different states view what these families are doing very differently from one state to the next.

Regardless of how they are required to register, school leaders themselves were much more split on how they would prefer to have their families considered by their states, with 57 percent preferring their students to be registered as private school students, and 43 percent preferring them to register as homeschoolers.

Choice programs and other regulations

The survey also asked about schools’ participation in several types of state- or local-level school choice programs. School leaders’ responses when asked whether their schools participate in a set of common programs are reported in Figure 5.

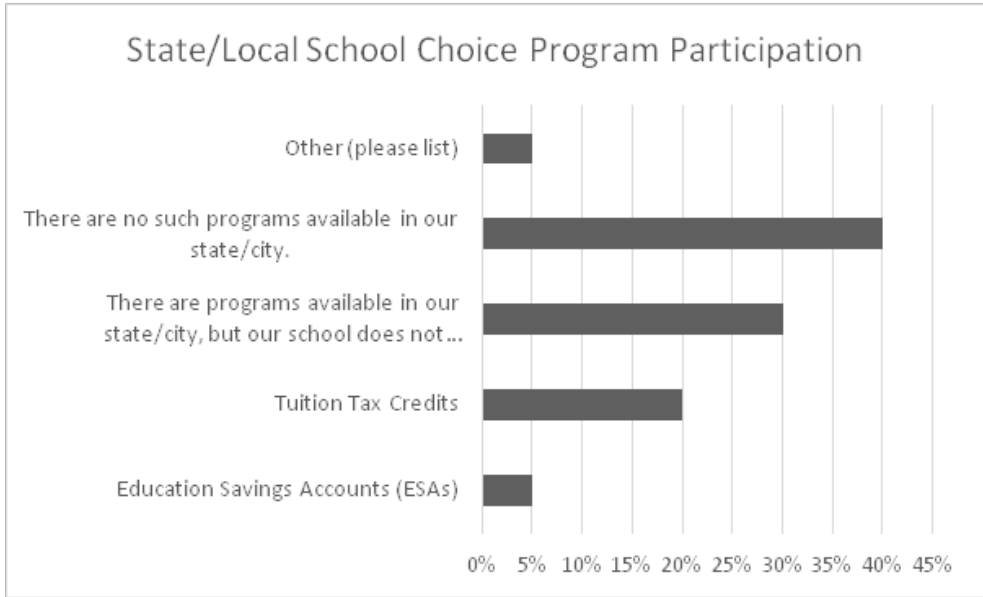


Figure 5: State/Local School Choice Program Participation

“Other” responses included, a state-level scholarship program for private school aid available only to special needs students. At least 20 such programs exist in various U.S. states (EdChoice, 2020a), though use of such programs was not a common response in this survey.

COVID-19

This survey also asked a set of COVID – related questions. COVID-19 disrupted every brick and mortar school in the U.S. in 2020 (EdWeek, 2020). A survey conducted in November/December 2020 found that 60 percent of private school students receiving in-person instruction, compared to 24 percent of conventional public school students. (Henderson, Peterson, & West, 2021). Research from several school organizations has noted a decline in private school enrollment due to COVID-19 (Swaner & Lee, 2020; McDonald & Schultz, 2021). McCluskey (2021) suggests that low-cost pri-

vate schools were especially vulnerable. Hybrid homeschool leaders, however have anecdotally reported being less affected by the unexpected shutdowns in the spring of 2020 than were nearby schools (Wearne, 2020b). Some conventional public schools experimented with hybrid homeschool-like systems explicitly in response to the virus (Texas Education Agency, 2020), while others began such experiments earlier and continued them in 2020-21 (Sechtn, 2018). Responses to this survey seem to be in line with anecdotes suggesting that COVID-19 was less disruptive to hybrid homeschools compared to their 5-day peers. Hybrid homeschool leaders were asked to compare the disruption to their operation with their perceptions of the disruptions at nearby, 5-day schools in Spring 2020. Their responses are reported in Figure 6.

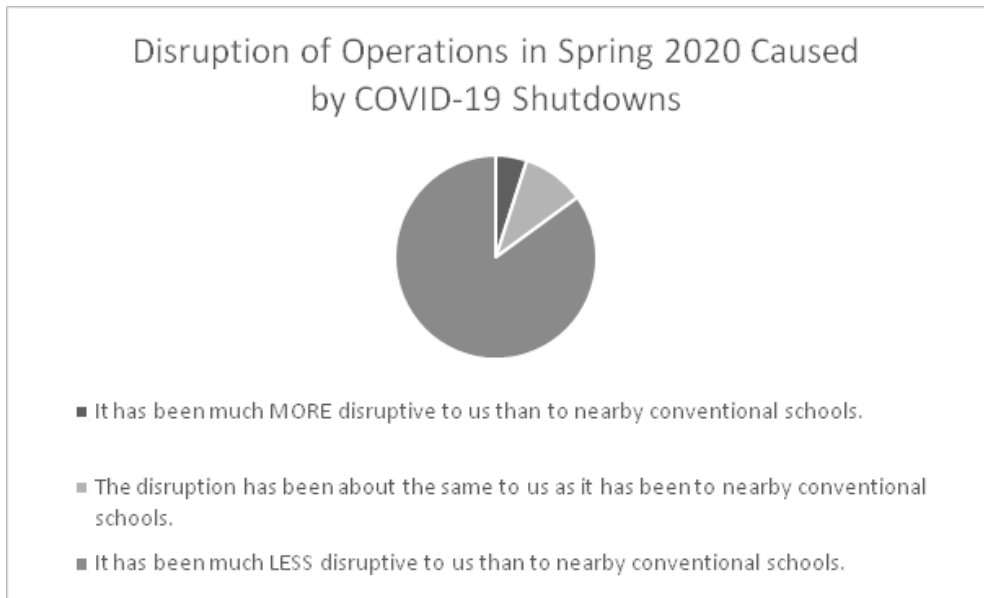


Figure 6: Disruption of Operations in Spring 2020 Causes by COVID-19 Shutdowns

This makes some sense, as these schools are used to operating remotely for some portion of the week in normal times, though these data are based on hybrid homeschool leaders' perceptions of other nearby schools. At many schools, teachers post lessons for the days students are home to an online portal. Students and parents access that portal every week to find lesson plans, assignments, documents, and message from teachers. Conventional schools often have online portals for grades and assignments for parents to monitor as well, though hybrid homeschools use them as part of their normal academic operations, knowing that all of their students will

be working from home several days per week, every week. It is likely that a large percentage of these hybrid homeschools simply shifted from being somewhat online two or three days per week to being fully online, five days per week in Spring 2020. They already had the infrastructure in place, as well as some practice in that environment compared to their conventional school peers.

It is also worth noting that, for the most part, these hybrid homeschool families work through their lesson plans at their own pace on the “home days.” This is a different approach from how many school systems have set up their “remote days” or “digital learning days” during COVID-induced school closings; many conventional schools often required their students to be logged in and synchronously “present” at their computers for portions of the day, rather than letting students pace their days themselves. Gwinnett County Public Schools, the largest public school system in the state of Georgia, to take on typical example, operated its online (home) days following these guidelines in 2020-21: “...students will be required to participate in digital instruction on a specific schedule with their teachers (synchronous learning), and also complete activities and assignments (asynchronous learning) on their own time to meet assignment deadlines” (Gwinnett County, 2020).

When asked about how much closures due to the virus affected them on

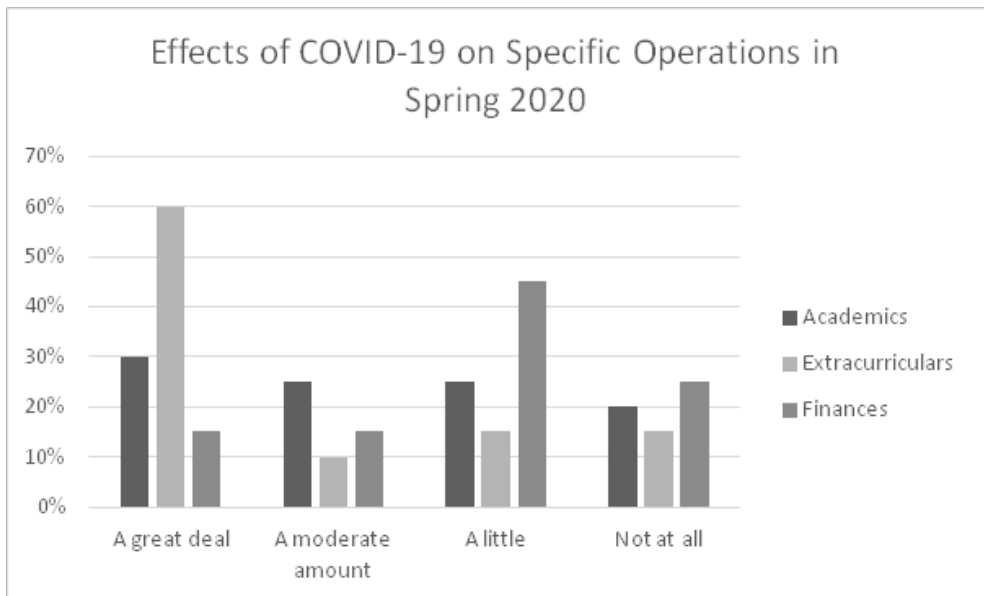


Figure 7: Effects of COVID-19 on Specific Operations in Spring 2020

particular issues this spring, it appears that extracurricular activities were harmed most at the hybrid homeschools due to COVID-19, and finances harmed least, with academics falling in between. These results are reported in Figure 7.

Discussion: Implications for Policy and Practice

Regulation and “Permissionless Innovation”

States are requiring these various hybrid homeschools, to register in different ways, either as homeschoolers or as private schoolers, though they may look and operate quite similarly to one another. It could be the case that one set of regulations makes this type of school easier to operate than the other. But when asked, “Are there particular ways or particular issues on which your state regulates hybrid homeschools’ which are especially helpful or especially harmful?,” nearly every respondent said “No” or “none.” One offered simply that “Our state is very supportive of school choice.” Most respondents either have no state or local school choice programs available, or else have them available but choose not to use them, suggesting that these schools are capable of operating in multiple regulatory environments. Respondents did not offer ways they were being harmed by regulations, nor offer suggestions for help, which may imply that these schools’ inclination is often to ignore policy battles. For example, most existing state-level education savings accounts (ESAs) would completely cover the average tuition at one of these hybrid homeschools (EdChoice 2020c), yet the schools themselves are not clamoring for this type of aid, as a group. And though they may differ with some particular ways their students are classified by their states, they are also not clamoring for relief from regulatory burdens. Consistent with the idea of a system of “permissionless innovation” (Thierer 2016, 2014), they mostly appear to be going about their business, and avoiding the legal and political battles that charter schools and private schools seeking funding from taxpayer-based choice programs so often endure.

This is not to say that state regulations are irrelevant to these schools. According to respondents to this survey, in at least one state the schools must be accredited to operate at all. And state decisions affect whether many students will be classified as homeschoolers, as private school students, or as something else. In response to the questions about available school choice programs, one respondent stated that a special needs scholarship was available to private schools in their state, but not to “non-traditional schools,” which is how this respondent was classified. Such designations

can affect schools' ability to compete in athletics (which may, in turn, affect enrollment), or, as was the case in one state, how these schools' graduates would qualify for state college scholarship programs (Wearne, 2020a). Such programs are contested within the homeschool and hybrid homeschool communities, however. Some homeschool advocates support laws allowing homeschool students to compete on public school sports teams, for example, while other strongly oppose them (Texas Homeschool Coalition, 2017). Other programs, such as funding offered through education savings accounts or tuition tax credits may see similar divisions of opinion among hybrid homeschoolers.

COVID-19 has been extremely disruptive to schools around the U.S., though based on the data in this survey, low-cost hybrid homeschools seem not to have been affected as negatively as other low-cost/low-margin private schools. Most hybrid homeschools seem to have actually grown their waitlists and enrollments in 2020-21. It is possible that students moved from (mostly closed) public and five-day private schools toward (mostly open) hybrid homeschools in 2020-21. Parents from relatively more expensive private schools, for example, may have been more willing to pay for hybrid homeschool tuition rather than tuition at a private school that was offering only online instruction, though this study does not explicitly explore these possible phenomena.

Policy Suggestions and Conclusion

Unlike groups in states with no charter schools or charter school laws, or states with little private school choice, these hybrid homeschools are generally not seeking help from their state legislatures in order to boost their numbers. Nor are they asking for legal or political obstacles to be removed. They truly are operating in "permissionless" ways, and, according to this survey, seem mostly content to continue doing so.

It would be valuable for researchers to track new regulations affecting hybrid homeschools, and useful to state-level policymakers to be more aware of hybrid homeschools and similar entities, as a variety of schooling models are becoming more widespread in the various states due to both the COVID-19 aftermath, and to their own pre-existing momentum. Many of these new schooling models, including hybrid homeschools will not fit well into existing regulatory, accountability, or program structures. In many cases hybrid homeschools seem unlikely to seek regulatory relief, but that could change. In some cases, some hybrid homeschools may want eligibility and

access to some state programs (such as state-funded college scholarship programs for their graduates). For the moment, many seem likely to simply want to operate as they have been without additional interference. To the extent these hybrid homeschools have been able to adjust more nimbly to the shock of COVID-19, it may be useful to watch them operate as they have been, and to allow other schools to learn from their models for the future.

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