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Avoiding "Mommy Grades": Homeschool Parent Strategies for College Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Homeschooling high school presents a unique set of opportunities and challenges for parents who want their children to attend college. This study draws upon a set of qualitative interviews with homeschooling mothers in the Houston, TX area who have homeschooled children for high school. The study finds that parents feel homeschooling is the ideal way to prepare their children for college, but the structural constraints of the practice coupled with their concerns of how colleges evaluate homeschooled applicants led them to depend heavily on homeschool instruction provided outside of the home. Though outsourcing was a practice used by families before their children entered high school, it took on new meaning as their children progressed closer to the external evaluation of the college admissions process. These findings highlight how college preparation among homeschooling families in Texas is dependent upon familial privilege and speaks to the gatekeeping power of college admissions.

INTRODUCTION

Approximately one third of children homeschooled in the United States are in a high school equivalent grade (McQuiggan et al. 2017) and homeschool organizations and advocates are quick to affirm, often without solid evidence, the benefits of homeschooling for college performance and completion. Despite these claims, it is unclear how homeschooling families of high school students prepare their children for college. Many parents, especially within the middle and upper-classes, help guide their children through the college preparation process (Stevens 2009). These privileged parents do so by leveraging their knowledge and resources to ensure that their children are on the college track and will be competitive college applicants (Stevens 2009). Indeed, it is argued that “the system that the elite colleges and universities developed to evaluate the best and the brightest is now the template for what counts as ideal child rearing in America” (Stevens 2009: 247). If acceptance into college is a marker of successful parenting then the admissions process is actually an evaluation of both students and their parents, who have played an active role in their children’s college preparation. Homeschooling parents, who are by definition highly involved in the education of their children, may see college admissions as a critical driver of homeschooling for high school. Yet, no research has considered the intersection of homeschool and college preparation and how parents who are unaccustomed to formal scrutiny of their homeschool decisions may prepare for the external evaluation of college admissions.

The number of homeschooled children in the U.S. has grown considerably over the past two decades (Rathbun and Wang 2019), but the homeschool movement remains largely affluent and white (McQuiggan et al. 2017; Planty et al. 2009; Stevens 2001). The increasing popularity of homeschooling among privileged families has resulted in a wide range of resources and

services catering to families homeschooling children of all ages (Gann and Carpenter 2018; Hanna 2012). Despite the growth in homeschooling and the high number of students who are homeschooled for high school, much of the homeschool literature has focused on younger children and overlooked the complexities that homeschooling college-bound high school students could present.

This study asks what strategies parents use to homeschool high school in Houston, Texas, and the extent to which their approach is influenced by the college admissions process. Using data from interviews with 22 homeschooling mothers, this research finds that college preparation plays a significant role in parents' motivations to homeschool for high school and their tactics to smooth the transition from homeschool to college. A critical strategy used by the parents was to "outsource" instruction, or have their children take courses from instructors outside of their household. By doing so, the parents believed they were maximizing the college preparatory benefits of homeschooling while minimizing the risks that homeschooling could play for their children when they applied to college. Thus, even in this context of heightened parental autonomy and flexibility, the gatekeeping power of college admissions requires parents to leverage their privilege in specific ways to have their homeschool decisions, and by default their parenting decisions, favorably evaluated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homeschooling High School

Approximately about 1.7 million children ages 5 to 17 are homeschooled nationwide (McQuiggan, Megra, and Grady 2017), which is nearly double the number of children reported in 1999 (Rathbun and Wang 2019). Thirty one percent of homeschooled students are in a high

school equivalent grade, which accounts for about 3.8 percent of the national high school student population (McQuiggan et al. 2017). More recently, the impact of COVID-19 on education has thrust even more families into homeschooling unexpectedly, and as school districts across the country grapple with the decision to re-open or transition to virtual learning for the upcoming school year, the number of families who homeschool high school children may grow even further.

Homeschooling is legal in every state in the U.S., although regulation of the practice varies widely by state (Reich 2002). In Texas, homeschool families are only required to teach math, reading, spelling, grammar, and good citizenship, though the state does not verify that families have done so (TEA 2019; THSC 2020a). Homeschool demographic data are quite limited since many states do not keep records on homeschool families, (Isenberg 2007; Kunzman and Gaither 2013), but existing figures do indicate that the homeschool population is a privileged group. National survey data suggest that homeschooled children are generally non-Hispanic white, live in suburban areas, and reside in households that have an income above the federal poverty line (McQuiggan et al. 2017). Additionally, the percentage of homeschooling families in the U.S. who reported an annual income over \$50,000 increased from 36.5 percent to 60 percent from 1997 to 2007 (Planty et al. 2009). Though income data are limited, scholars argue that since homeschooling generally requires that households sacrifice the potential income of a parent in order to have someone at home overseeing their children's schooling, homeschooling is largely adopted by middle class families (Stevens 2001). In the majority of homeschooling families, mothers are responsible for homeschooling in the household (Kunzman and Gaither 2013; Lois 2013). Consequently, research on parental decision making in homeschool contexts is largely a discussion about the actions of middle class mothers.

Parental motivations to begin homeschooling vary widely and are multifaceted, spurred by factors such as religious beliefs, ideological stances, and individual family circumstances (Lois 2013; Gaither 2017; Stevens 2001). For some families, homeschooling is their ideal form of education and a route they sought early on for their children; for others, the decision to homeschool was a reaction to negative perceptions or experiences with more traditional schooling options (Green and Hoover-Dempsey 2007; Lois 2006). Families can have a number of reasons for beginning to homeschool their children, but these reasons could potentially change as children age. Whether parental motivations to homeschool change in relation to college preparation has not been addressed by previous research.

In addition to shifts in homeschooling motivation, parents may also adjust the manner in which they homeschool their high school-aged children to prepare them for college. Since homeschool regulation varies by state, some states, such as Texas, do not impose any formal graduation requirements on homeschooling families (Reich 2002; TEA 2019). Thus, parents are fully in charge of ensuring their children are prepared for college. While a lack of regulation grants families flexibility and autonomy when making homeschool decisions, they do so without the structural supports of conventional schools, like access to guidance counselors and college planning resources. The task of helping their homeschooled children prepare and plan for college falls completely on parents unless they can seek and secure aid from private resources.

The manner and extent to which homeschooling parents are involved in their children's college preparation matters because research that explores how homeschooled students are received by colleges is extremely limited and presents mixed conclusions. Surveys of college admissions officers report that homeschooled applicants are viewed similarly to conventionally schooled applicants and are accepted at similar rates, although this research focuses on less

selective institutions (Kunzman and Gaither 2013). However, qualitative interviews with admissions officers have found that many of the officials maintained biases against homeschooled applicants, bringing survey research on the subject into question (Kunzman and Gaither 2013). Therefore, parents who are worried that their homeschooled students will not be applying to college on a level playing field may seek homeschool methods and resources that can mitigate any stigma in the admissions process.

The rapidly expanding market of homeschool materials (Gann and Carpenter 2018; Hanna 2012), coupled with a high level of educational autonomy, means that home educators in less regulated states must make numerous decisions about how they want to educate their children and what their homeschool goals are. If parents have internalized the college system and integrated it into their parenting decisions (Stevens 2009), then it is crucial to understand how this operates for homeschooling parents, who have the most control of any parents over their children's college preparation. Homeschooling is a unique context to study parental involvement in college planning because of the multiple roles it requires parents to fill. Lacking the institutional support of a traditional school, parents who homeschool their children through high school are not only tasked with providing support and guidance through the college planning process, but also ensuring that their children are academically prepared for college. In this way, the actions parents take in response to college admissions guidelines speak to the weight that colleges have even among families who have actively distanced themselves from other institutional constraints.

Parental College Involvement

Parental involvement in education generally changes over time (Crosnoe 2001; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, and Sandler 2007; Spera 2005), with parents engaging less in direct educational involvement, such as homework assistance, as their children enter adolescence (Hill and Tyson 2009; Park and Holloway 2018). However, many parents are active agents in the college planning process for their children (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Lareau and Weininger 2008; Myers and Myers 2012). For middle-class families, “the college application process is best conceptualized as a family affair” since parents play such a substantial role in assisting their children (Lareau and Weininger 2008: 119). Parents influence their children’s disposition towards college, encouraging activities and goals aligned with attaining a college degree (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000). Students whose parents are involved and active supporters of a college education are more likely to graduate high school with higher GPAs and have higher post-secondary educational attainment than students whose parents are less involved (Benner, Boyle, and Sadler 2016). Parents draw upon their own backgrounds and knowledge to provide college guidance for their children; therefore, the likelihood that a student obtains a college degree significantly increases if their parent has a college degree (Reynolds and Johnson 2011), and students whose parents have higher education levels apply to more selective colleges (An 2010). Middle-class mothers play an especially prominent role in the college planning process since they are generally the primary parent assisting their children (Baker and Stevenson 1986; Lareau and Weininger 2008). Since many homeschooling families are middle-class, and these parents are already active participants in their children’s learning, it is strongly plausible that this high level of parental involvement in college planning and preparation extends to the homeschool context.

Highly resourced parents who are attuned to the admissions requirements of selective colleges will use their resources to mold their children into ideal college applicants (Stevens 2009). The cultural knowledge that derives from membership in the middle- and upper-classes influences parental self-efficacy, making parents more likely to approach their children's education from a place of self-assurance and confidence since they can rely on past experiences and knowledge to guide their actions (Park and Holloway 2018; Reay 2004). These parents not only feel capable of assisting their children with college planning, but also feel that it is part of being a good parent. Middle-class notions of good parenting encourage a high level of involvement, driving parents to devote significant amounts of time, energy, and resources into their children's development and academic performance, thereby improving their college readiness (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2008). The practices of middle-class parents work to bolster their children's college applications, further signaling their suitability and belonging in selective college spaces (Stevens 2009). By attending college, especially elite colleges, children can reproduce their family's socioeconomic status, maintaining status and wealth through the gatekeeping power of the college admissions system (Lee 2013). Thus, children's skills are cultivated not only for their personal development, but also for their strategic use in college admissions since parents feel responsible for guaranteeing their child's successful transition into college because of its benefits for their children and the message it sends about their parenting.

Parents can be involved both directly and indirectly involved in college preparation. Parents can play an influential role in course selection, encouraging their children to take college preparatory courses. For example, dual credit programs are used by families to ease the transition from high school to college, allowing students to acclimate to the demands of

college courses to ensure future college success (Bailey, Hughes, and Karp 2002). These college preparation courses can also indicate a student's academic skill and college readiness in the selective college admissions process (Geiser and Santelices 2004; Klugman 2012). Parents may also work with others to support their children's college preparation. Families with the resources to do so may hire professional services to assist their children with their college applications (McDonough 1994). Private college consultants provide guidance to privileged students, helping to craft students into ideal college applicants and reduce the college planning burden on parents. Families can also hire private SAT tutors who will coach students towards high test scores, improving their chances of attending a selective institution. Highly involved parents also often work in tandem with school personnel, such as teachers and guidance counselors, to guide their children's college planning (Perna 2006), which can additionally serve the purpose of filling any gaps in parents' college knowledge. The increasing popularity of homeschooling has generated a large pool of services and resources that cater to the practice, giving parents a high level of control over their children's college preparation and the extent of their role in that process.

The strategies that homeschooling parents use to prepare their children for college may also speak to the intricacies of homeschooling older students (Kunzman and Gaither 2013) and their subsequent impact on parental self-efficacy. Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) found that homeschooling parents would adopt a parent-focused or partner-focused role construction, which they described as a function of parents' self-efficacy. Those with a parent-focused role construction reported feeling well-equipped to educate their elementary-aged children because they believed they had the content knowledge and instructional skills to do so. In contrast, partnership-focused role construction occurred when parents relied on other sources, or 'partners', to aid in their child's homeschool education, finding that parents were often

homeschooling in reaction to poor perceptions of public schools whom they saw as failed educational partners. Those with a partnership-focused role construction tended to have a weaker sense of self-efficacy, noting the difficulties of homeschooling and the benefits of relying on other resources to assist with their child's education. Among this sample of parents, the majority identified more closely with a parent-focused rather than partnership-focused construction. However, since role construction and self-efficacy are dynamic (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997; Park and Holloway 2018), this trend may differ for homeschool parents preparing their children for college, prompted by the increasing complexity of their children's educational needs. Parents can feel less efficacious in the ability to assist their children with school work as their children age and encounter more advanced subject matter (Eccles and Harold 1993). If parents feel less efficacious and require the assistance of resources outside the home to facilitate educational instruction, then they may reconstruct their conception of the role that a homeschooling parent should ideally play for their children at that stage. Homeschooling strategies born from shifts in self-efficacy and parental role reconstruction would be intrinsically tied to class status and background, since families must possess both the knowledge of how to secure educational resources for their children and the ability to finance those resources.

Homeschool parents' involvement in college planning and preparation may not only be a matter of parental self-efficacy, but also a defensive reaction to how they believe their homeschooled children will be received by colleges. Despite arguments that there is an increasing acceptance of homeschooling in mainstream culture (Stevens 2003), parents often worry about the risk of homeschooling when they first begin due to social stigma and concerns about their own abilities to educate their children (Lois 2013). However, as homeschooling families become more comfortable with the practice over time these concerns can subside (Lois

2013), although existing literature on homeschooling has not examined whether the college planning process causes these concerns to resurface. Research on urban public school choice finds that middle class parents of younger children viewed the risks of school choice as marginal, believing that their privilege could buffer any ill effects from their school selection (Kimelberg 2014). But, as their children approached high school and the college admissions process, the decision of where to send their children to school became more consequential (Kimelberg 2014). This shift in the perception of risk may also apply to homeschool families who worry about the way colleges will assess homeschool applicants. The college admissions process is a multi-layered evaluation of applicants; colleges review standardized test scores, transcripts, student essays, recommendation letters, and may even interview applicants. Thus, in states like Texas where homeschooled students are never externally evaluated by state-mandated tests or metrics, the college admissions process represents a truly novel time for these students and their parents, who have never had their homeschool decisions formally evaluated.

Homeschooling is an important case in which to consider the role that parents play in preparing their children for college and the resources that they utilize to do so, examining how college admissions requirements impact the manner in which homeschool parents educate their children. This research explores how families who homeschool through high school discuss their motivations for their approach to high school education and the strategic way parents signal their students' academic preparation to colleges. In addition, this research considers how the challenges specific to homeschooling high school impact parental role construction and self-efficacy in their children's education.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

This study relies on interviews with 22 homeschool mothers in the greater Houston area who were currently or had recently homeschooled their children for high school. The majority of the Houston metro area sits within Harris county, which has the highest number of homeschooled students in the state of Texas, making the area an ideal location for studying homeschooling families (THSC 2020b). To participate in the study, parents had to be currently homeschooling a child who is 11 years old or older for high school, or have a child who had graduated from homeschooling within the past 3 years. Since homeschooled students do not strictly adhere to typical course sequencing and timing (Jolly and Matthews 2017), the eligible age range of children was expanded to reflect that. Nineteen of the respondents were currently homeschooling their children and 3 were parents of recent graduates.

Participants were contacted using a variety of methods, both online and in-person. This study primarily relied upon snowball sampling, a process where participants refer individuals from their networks who may be willing to participate as well. Respondents were also recruited through local homeschool organizations. Since Houston has a large homeschool community, I contacted a wide array of groups that cater to different homeschool-related interests and ideologies in an attempt to maximize heterogeneity in the sample. Homeschool organization members were recruited both online and in-person. After I described the research to organization leaders, they disseminated information about the study to their group members or allowed me to post recruitment materials on their social media pages. I also recruited attendees at in-person organization meetings and hung flyers in homeschool-related spaces, such as a bookstore for homeschool curricula.

Twenty one of the twenty two mothers self-identified as white. All of the mothers had at least a high school diploma, with sixteen participants holding a bachelor's degree or higher.

Nineteen parents reported some kind of religious affiliation. Twelve mothers were employed at the time of the interview, while 10 were stay at home mothers or not working. Household income ranged from \$68,000 to \$500,000, with a median household income of \$160,000. The number of children the parents had ranged from 1 to 11, with an average of approximately 4 children per family. Although only 14 mothers shared how much their family spends annually on homeschool materials and courses, the amount ranged from \$300 to \$6,000, averaging just over \$3,500. The majority of the parents described their initial approach to homeschooling as eclectic, or a mix of curricular options and pedagogical styles, which meant that they utilized a wide range of homeschool curricula and resources. There was also considerable range in the length of time that the mothers had been homeschooling, spanning from one to thirty years; most mothers had been homeschooling for more than 5 years.

All data were gathered between May and November 2019. Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview strategy. The parents were asked to discuss what motivates them to homeschool, what homeschooling looks like at the middle and high school level, and how they were engaging or planning to engage with college and career planning for their children. In addition, the interviews explored their opinions regarding Texas homeschool law and their involvement in the homeschool community.

The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted an average of 90 minutes. Twenty one interviews took place in the respondent's home, on Rice University's campus, or at a local coffee shop. Only one interview was done remotely through video conferencing. Following each interview, I typed or recorded detailed field notes to capture initial thoughts about the interview and any information that would not have been captured on the interview recording.

Each interview was transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, the interviews were coded using MAXQDA software and a flexible coding method (Deterding and Waters 2018). Codes were generated using the broad themes of the interview guide, as well as emergent analytic ideas. The coding scheme was refined throughout the analytic process, adding in-vivo subcodes to capture nuance.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are divided into three sections to illustrate how college planning impacts numerous decisions made by homeschooling parents with children in high school. The first section explores the mothers' motivations to homeschool their children for high school and the college-going benefits they believe their children derive from choosing to homeschool. The second section discusses the specific challenges that come with homeschooling high school and assisting with college preparation. The final section describes how parents' college going orientation informed the strategies they used to address the challenges of homeschooling high school and ensure their children were on track to attend college.

Motivations to Homeschool High School

The mothers' motivations to homeschool their children for high school were generally a continuation of their initial reasons for homeschooling, although college preparation became a primary factor over time as they reconstructed their role in the homeschooling context. Though families expressed concern about how colleges evaluate homeschooled students, they fervently believed that homeschooling would provide an exceptional avenue to prepare their children for college. Nineteen of the parents had homeschooled their children for at least 5 years, meaning that the vast majority had adapted to a homeschooling lifestyle, investing a significant amount of

time and resources into homeschooling their children over an extended period of time. The respondents were first drawn to homeschooling for a variety of academic and non-academic reasons, including negative experiences with public or private schools, a desire for individualized learning, or religious beliefs. The majority of the families began homeschooling their children when they were young, which meant that college preparation was not a primary factor in their initial homeschool decisions. Once their children began secondary-level coursework however, college preparation took precedence in their homeschool decision-making.

The parents emphasized how efficient a homeschool schedule can be, especially in comparison to a traditional public or private school schedule. Alice has two teenage sons and saw this flexibility and efficiency as integral to the college admissions process for her sons. She said, “What homeschooling really allows us to do, especially the high school, at every level, but especially high school, they can get all of their studies done in a fraction of the time that a brick and mortar school can do because it's so fast. Which means my sons have paid internships, they started their own nonprofit, they work, they've done debate, they've done Model UN, they do karate, they are both Eagle Scouts, and they're working on a computer competition where they're hoping to go to nationals this year.” She continued, “In other words, they can do so much more. Now, they are very busy boys, but their time is used very efficiently to learn so they can do all of these other things that really add to their education. So, so for us, you know, that's actually been the biggest benefit. And if you're trying to get into a competitive school, that gives you, as a homeschooler, that gives you a tremendous advantage.” Alice’s statement illustrates how the flexibility and efficiency offered by homeschooling can be used strategically as a way to both foster children’s interests and also cultivate an impressive resume for college applications, which could serve a protective function for homeschooled students who may face heightened scrutiny

in the admissions process. Since Alice knew that these types of activities are prized by colleges, she valued how the structure of homeschool allows for active involvement in them. Helping her sons maximize the flexibility and efficiency of homeschool for college preparation is therefore a key responsibility for Alice as a homeschooling parent.

Texas has no formal credit hour requirements for homeschooled students, so parents have the ability to control both the pace and duration of their children's education. Deborah's son is 13 and a sophomore in high school. Deborah and her husband originally pulled their son from his public elementary school because they did not feel the school was adequately meeting his unique academic needs. She described her son as profoundly gifted, which has meant that he takes courses at a highly accelerated pace. By homeschooling, she can control the pace of his learning, providing ways for him to be academically challenged while also keeping him in spaces she thinks are socially appropriate for his age. At the high school level, this also means that she has control over when her academically advanced son graduates. Deborah explains, "Because we're homeschooling high school, I can take more than four years to do high school because of his age...so we can just say he's homeschooling, he's homeschooling, and graduate him whenever we want to." Though Deborah is certain that her son will attend college once he graduates, she emphasizes that it is ultimately her decision to determine when he is prepared to attend college. Deborah values having authority over her son's education which motivates her to continue homeschooling her son.

Though not all of the families began homeschooling with the intention of continuing through high school, the decision to persist with the practice as their children approached secondary level grades was motivated by the same basic reasons that led families to begin homeschooling in the first place, as well as the strategic ways that it could be used to better

prepare their children for college. Parents valued the flexibility of a homeschool schedule because it allowed their children to efficiently learn at their own pace and participate in activities that could boost their college applications. They also cherished maintaining their authority over their children's education since they trusted themselves to know when their children were prepared to enter college.

Challenges to Homeschooling High School

The positive motivations that mothers had to homeschool their children for high school did not obscure the structural and developmental challenges that came with making that decision. Patricia described how each of her three sons, upon finishing eighth grade, were given the option to choose where they wanted to go for high school, be it private school, public school, or continuing with homeschool. She shared, "We told them, you know, everything is on the table because if you, if, if a high schooler doesn't want to do something, you can't make them. So we say you, you choose, but you have to choose at the end of eighth grade, um, because we can't homeschool ninth grade and then say, 'I want to go to the public school for 10th grade.'" She explained to her sons that there are practical barriers to transferring from homeschooling to a public school; "You know, your credits don't work out. We have to make a, a 4-year plan for you... So you understand that, you know, your choice is your choice for all four years. But that is your choice." Although her children could technically have transferred to a public or private school after starting to homeschool for high school, it would have serious repercussions for their ability to finish high school at an ideal pace. Thus, within Patricia's offer to her sons is also the acknowledgement that homeschooling for high school is a long-term commitment and therefore a highly consequential decision.

Tara also spoke about structural constraints, emphasizing how the commitment of homeschooling for high school begins once children start high school-level coursework if parents want to keep their children on a college track. Tara is a mother of 5 and has homeschooled her youngest four children, beginning when her sons were in elementary school. She believed that concerns about this long-term commitment drive many homeschooling families to enroll their children in traditional schools for high school. However, Tara felt that once children started high school-level coursework, switching from homeschool to conventional school could be detrimental to their academic timeline. One of Tara's sons is a senior in high school. Due to the flexibility and control that homeschooling allows families, her son took advanced science courses online when he was in middle school. Tara felt that if he had tried to go to a conventional school for high school, the school would not have accepted those course credits and allowed her son to maintain an advanced course of study. She explained, "Like, these online courses he was talking about for science, those were in middle school and they were high school-level courses. And to go back to school, they would not have given him credit for taking any of those." Tara continued, "Which means he wouldn't have been able to take the AP classes because they would have made him repeat, you know, biology, chemistry, physics, those kinds of things."

Perceptions of structural barriers between homeschooling and private or public schools meant that once families began to homeschool more advanced coursework, even if their children were not technically in a high school equivalent grade, parents felt it would be detrimental to stop homeschooling. Since Tara highly valued AP coursework and understood that colleges do as well, it made her unwilling to potentially sacrifice her son's ability to take college preparatory courses in high school. However, this commitment to homeschooling through high school

effectively places the responsibility of facilitating college preparation onto the shoulders of parents.

In order for parents to effectively gear center their homeschool decisions in college preparation, they had to understand college admissions requirements, which could mean altering their overall approach to homeschooling. When her two children were in elementary and middle school, Jolena focused on choosing courses and educational activities that catered to their individual interests. However, she said that when her children entered high school, the interest-driven approach she had taken to homeschooling had to be adjusted if her kids were to be on a college track. She explained,

You don't know how to teach high school, even if you've gone to high school. And we worked backwards, we started looking at what the kids were interested in...Figured out they were probably college-bound based on their interests. And we started very loosely looking at college admissions. What do the kids need to be able to get into college? How do they handle homeschool admissions? Um, and we ended up looking at high school graduation requirements for the state of Texas and we kind of mashed them all together and went, okay, well this is what we think you need to do. We got into high school and we actually ended up changing it a little bit more than that, um, based more on where they were going with interests, college majors, things like that.

Although the interests of Jolena's teenagers still played a prominent role in shaping their homeschool education, their interests were firmly positioned within a framework emphasizing college preparation. Jolena confidently assessed numerous requirements to ensure that her children would meet college admission standards, which demonstrates the tiered levels of

decision-making that occur as homeschool parents chart a pathway from high school to college for their children.

The college-going orientation of the home educators also meant that by homeschooling high school they had taken on the responsibility of navigating the college admissions process with their children. Carla has fifteen-year old twins and shared how the burden of assisting them with college planning falls on her shoulders. She discussed the multiple roles that a homeschooling parent plays, stating, “If they don't understand something, I can't be like, 'I can't believe that science teacher didn't teach you how to do the-', you know, cause I am the science teacher. Um, I can't say that, you know that their college counselor is going to tell them when to sign up for the PSAT and blah blah blah cause I am the college counselor.” Carla sees the role of a college counselor as demanding, referencing the steps her own high school guidance counselors took when she was in high school. “They hustled for us. You know, they were always submitting us in, you know, various scholarships and award things and whatever... So I had this huge community of teachers and counselors who were always like looking out for me and making sure that I was going through that machine.” She continues, “[my twins] don't have that machine... So I have to be the one that's kinda like, 'oh yeah, SAT, oh yeah, this, oh yeah, that' and looking out for that. Um, so yeah, I'm just trying to kind of like, you know, like we plotted out the next four years like it is, it's plotted, right? It might change. That's fine, but it's plotted and who did that? Me.” Though Carla’s experience is in no way representative of all public school students, her statement does speak to how her parental role construction and self-efficacy are shaped by her own experiences at her public school. She describes the roles she believes she must play to assist her children with college preparation based on the assistance she received in

high school, as well as her sense of efficacy in fulfilling those roles to the same standard that she remembers receiving from her school.

The pressure the parents felt about guiding their children through the college planning process was further heightened by the knowledge that they are engaging with a system that is often still not geared towards homeschooling students. For example, Allison discussed how taking standardized tests for college admission can be frustrating for homeschoolers since they lack an official school I.D. card. She says. “We have to get things notarized, even to take the CLEP test. We have a picture-- So they have like resources online, you print it and you print a picture, but you have to go get it notarized and have it sent. And then the proctor: [mimicking proctor] ‘Never seen it before... I don't know what this piece of paper is.’ So then they were gonna ask questions. So when we come back six months later for [my middle child] with the same piece of paper, I'm like, ‘Remember? We already did this with my other child.’” Allison’s experience assisting her children with standardized testing registration illustrates how the respondents needed to be highly familiar with college-related systems in order to best advocate for their children.

Parents also had to play a large role in the college application process, providing detailed information about their student’s high school coursework for colleges to evaluate. At the time of her interview, Alice’s eldest son was in the middle of applying to colleges and she described this process simply as “hell”. She stated, “First of all, I have to do a school profile, like any school would, but I've never written one before. So I had to research and find out what they want to know and how to describe it so that it was meaningful for them. Then I had to do a description of every course my son has ever taken as a homeschooler, including all of our home-brewed classes. And down to what books did I use? What resources did I use? How were they assessed?”

The whole thing. How many times a week did it meet?” Alice explained the reasoning behind this required level of detail, saying, “A lot of universities have some suspicion around homeschoolers, so you have to provide this information...I had heard on the grapevine that this was going to be needed, so I kept a lot of resources, but it was still tedious.”

Absent institutional actors who can provide guidance for the college admissions process, the homeschooling mothers were tasked with navigating this complicated system for their children. This required that they be highly familiar with college admissions requirements so that they could orient their children’s learning around college preparation and eventually advocate on behalf of their children to college systems unfamiliar or suspicious of home education.

Outsourcing High School Education

To address the challenges of homeschooling high school and ensure their children’s successful entrance into college, the mothers were highly strategic when choosing resources and courses for their children. The primary strategy used by the respondents was to “outsource” homeschool instruction, or have their children learn from sources outside of the home. By outsourcing, they could maximize the benefits of homeschooling for college preparation while also mitigating potential risks of homeschooling during the external evaluation of the college admissions process.

The college orientation of homeschooling families in this sample impacted the benefits they believed derive from learning from educators outside of the home, especially as their children progressed through high school. Elizabeth, who has homeschooled all eleven of her children, says that her advice to parents who are nervous to begin homeschooling for high school is to alter their conception of what it means to homeschool. Elizabeth stated, “...homeschooling

may not be the model you have in your head, in that you have to teach it all. Um, that there are resources out there. There's online courses, there's um, you know, tutorials, there's co-ops, there's lots of things available for them.” Indeed, parents utilized a wide variety of resources, including virtual schools, private tutoring, dual enrollment at community colleges, and homeschooling cooperatives (or co-ops) to facilitate educational instruction for their children. These options ranged in price, with many of the families spending thousands on homeschooling annually. For Elizabeth, the decision to outsource was driven directly by the age of her children and the knowledge that she could leverage her family’s resources to meet her children’s educational needs. She shares, “I personally don't feel confident in teaching any particular subject because, uh, I feel like my education was very poor. Um, but I know how to get the resources. Um, I have, I'm good at the younger ages. Um, I can pretty much teach any subject to the younger ages, but once we get up to junior high and up, then I usually get help.” Though not all of the respondents shared Elizabeth’s lack of confidence with teaching high school subject matter, they often espoused a similar efficacious attitude regarding their ability to identify and secure suitable resources for their children.

Although many of the families had begun outsourcing portions of their children’s education long before high school, the practice became more significant and took on new meaning as their children moved closer to applying to college. Though outsourcing was often used as a way for younger children to meet other homeschooled children in the community or engage in fun electives, outsourcing during high school provided students with the opportunity to smooth the transition from homeschool to college. Wendy is a mother of four and has homeschooled two of her children in the past. In addition, she is a high school science teacher for a company that provides small classes for homeschooled students. Wendy sees a large part of her

role as a homeschool educator as giving students a way to experience college-like expectations while still having their normal homeschool support system. She described the students in her courses, saying,

They come to me and they've been, you know, sheltered, and loved, and warm, and they get to me and I'm like, "I don't care what you think. I want you to tell me what I told you, just repeat it back to me because you're going to go sit in a college class with a teacher who does not care what you think. They just want to know what you learned from them." And so I spend a lot of my class basically kind of teaching them how to learn from textbooks. You know, these skills they're going to need if they go to college.

The experience Wendy gives to her students is exactly what some of the other mothers in the study were seeking when choosing resources for their children. Carolyn is a mother of four. Her three oldest children have all graduated from homeschool, leaving only her youngest at home. Her policy has been that by the time her children are juniors in high school, all of their education should be outsourced. Carolyn explained, "So junior and senior year we go and we do all classes, unless there's a particular reason that I want you to be doing a different class at home, all classes are at [the community college] junior and senior year because I want you to experience four tests and a final. I want you to experience taking notes in class and pop quizzes and all the things that you have because there's some school skills that you need to develop before you go to college and this is a great way to do it." As Wendy and Carolyn's statements illustrate, outsourced homeschooling is often framed explicitly within the narrative of college preparation. The parents' knowledge of useful college skills informed how they approached homeschool education for high school students. Courses taught by instructors outside of the home allow students time to adjust to the demands of a college coursework while still having the safety net of

their homeschool environment, setting them up for a smoother eventual transition to a 4-year college.

Parents discussed the necessity of being highly strategic in choosing high school coursework to maximize the efficiency of homeschooling. Deborah described homeschooling her son for high school as “really complicated,” saying, “It takes a lot of planning.” Deborah decided to enroll her son in dual credit courses for high school so that he could take sufficiently challenging coursework and also earn his associate’s degree before officially graduating from high school. She explained, “if we do this in homeschool and keep him under the homeschool umbrella, then it opens the door that he's not a transfer student when he's applying for a four year college. And that would make him eligible, remain eligible, for scholarships.” Thus, Deborah combined her knowledge of the college system with her authority as a homeschooling parent to maximize her son’s learning and chance of obtaining better college scholarships.

Outsourcing was also used strategically by the mothers to compensate for their lack of comfort with subject matter by exposing their children to instructors that they perceived as experts in their field. Jolena’s two children have taken online and dual credit courses for their high school math education. Jolena explains her reasoning for this, saying, “I’m not a math person. So the idea of teaching math was very intimidating to me because I didn't want them to have the same, um, issues or problems with math that I do. I wanted them to be much stronger in math.” Outsourcing served as a way for Jolena to pass on math instruction to those she felt were confident and competent with the subject material. Several parents turned to homeschooling co-ops to facilitate lessons to their children. Vicky’s five children participate in a local co-op for a portion of their courses. When asked about the structure of her children’s co-op, she said, “Parents teach, but, um, like [my son’s] physics lab teacher right now, he's, uh, a scientist at

NASA, so...they're people, his chemistry teacher is a chemist. His biology teacher worked in a biology lab, so they're very-- The teachers that teach those classes are very well qualified, so they're on par with, or maybe even above par with what you may get in regular high school. So they're very knowledgeable people.” This statement illustrates how Vicky justified her choice to outsource to the local homeschool co-op by emphasizing the background of the co-op teachers, framing them as subject matter experts.

Although the parents firmly believed that homeschooling was the best way to cultivate ideal college students, they often worried that colleges would have a negative perception of home education. Christina was a very vocal supporter of outsourcing education for her two children, despite her background and confidence with teaching. An important factor in Christina’s decision to have her oldest child take courses at the local community college was her concern about how her daughter’s homeschool education would be assessed by colleges in the future. She felt highly capable of teaching her daughter’s coursework in many cases, but by outsourcing she was able to provide external validation for her daughter’s academic mastery. Christina states,

I actually think that some of the community college classes maybe aren't as great as things that, that I would do for her, but they are a standard that a college can see, ‘Okay, this, this 15 year old took calculus 1 and got an A’ and it, for those people that don't understand homeschooling, it gives them a, a reference point...There are homeschoolers who do all of high school on their own. They, they, their kids are, you know, they get textbooks, they watch videos and they do all their courses and they assign grades and they do it. I could have done it... I could've done that, but I really, I chose a, a little

different path. I wanted to make sure that when they looked at her transcript, they knew it wasn't mom just giving all A's, they knew this kid has all A's. Not from me.

Similar to Christina, Jolena stated, “We understand that [colleges] need to know they're not mommy grades.” The mothers’ desire to have their children be college bound, coupled with the perception of a lingering homeschool stigma among 4-year colleges, led families to also rely more on educational instruction outside of the home. Since public and private schools are effectively off the table for these families once they begin homeschooling for high school, any concerns about home education had to be addressed through private options.

Linda was the only mother in the study who did not outsource any portion of her children’s high school education. Her seven children all used the same brand of curriculum for kindergarten through twelfth grade, with Linda overseeing their progress. Importantly, Linda did not orient her homeschool decisions around college preparation. She shared, “We didn't care. They can- here's what we told them: ‘If you go to college, you're paying for it.’ And so, so it's up to them. If they want to study something, they can, but they're paying for it, you know? And so, uh, so it wasn't a big push.” She rationalized this orientation by highlighting how her husband and both sets of their parents never earned a college degree. However, Linda did earn her bachelors and masters when her youngest son was in middle and high school. Because of that, Linda conceded, “So I guess now we're a little more college-y now since I've been [to college].” For her youngest child, Linda did alter her homeschooling approach for high school math, choosing to teach her son from a college textbook that one of her older children had given her instead of continuing with the same curriculum she had used in years prior. This change occurred after witnessing her older children’s struggles with college math as well as her own experiences

in college. Linda's case is a critical outlier in the study because it underscores how strongly connected secondary-level homeschool decision making is to a college-going orientation.

Across this sample, the majority of homeschooling mothers expressed a strong desire for their children to attend and succeed in college, and this shaped not only their motivations to homeschool for high school, but the adaptations they made to their homeschool approach in order to address the challenges of homeschooling secondary school. Though the mothers believed that homeschooling was the strongest way to cultivate and prepare students for college, they still took steps to ensure that their children's homeschool education would be positively evaluated by parties unfamiliar with or suspicious of homeschooling. These steps largely meant that for high school, the respondents' children were receiving the majority of their instruction from sources outside of the home. This strategy of outsourcing homeschool education was perceived as beneficial to their children's chances of enrolling and succeeding in a 4-year college.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The parents' desire for their children to attend college heavily influenced their reasoning for homeschooling through high school, since they perceived that homeschooling's flexible nature allows families to prioritize college preparation in the most efficient way possible. Their strong beliefs in the benefits of homeschooling spurred the parents to homeschool through high school despite its unique challenges and the long term commitment of that decision. Parents' knowledge of and familiarity with college shaped their strategies for homeschooling high school and addressing these challenges. The respondents' high level of education meant that they could draw upon their personal college knowledge to better assist their children. In addition, the

financial resources of these families enabled them to take advantage of services that could further aid their children's college plans, which overwhelmingly involved outsourcing high school instruction.

Outsourced instruction served many functions for the parents in the study. The homeschooling mothers framed outsourcing as a way to smooth the transition from homeschool to college, giving their children time to acclimate to instruction outside of the home and build skills they perceived as essential for college success. Outsourcing also filled gaps in their subject matter knowledge because parents could rely on expert instructors to teach material that they themselves felt uncomfortable with. Instruction outside of the home also served the critical role of providing external validation for their children's academic performance. For mothers who feared how so-called 'mommy grades' would be evaluated by colleges suspicious of homeschooling, outsourcing was seen as a vital practice.

Interestingly, outsourcing instruction did not seem to dramatically change how the respondents discussed their role as a home educator. The reasons parents gave for outsourcing diverges from what would be expected based on Green and Hoover-Dempsey's (2007) discussion of a partnership-focused orientation in homeschooling. Though they were usually not the primary instructor for their children's high school coursework, parents were still highly involved as educational facilitators and felt efficacious in their ability to identify and select appropriate resources for their children's education. A lack of comfort with some subject materials, especially high level math, did contribute to outsourcing, but mothers also framed their partnership-orientation in a way that emphasized the strategic value of outsourcing for college preparation.

This study's exploration of how parents homeschool for high school illustrates how dependent college preparation in a homeschool setting is on parental knowledge and resources. While well-resourced parents are more likely to be highly involved in their children's college preparation (Lareau and Weininger 2008), the level of involvement and specific ways in which parents are involved is amplified in the homeschool context. In this setting, which has virtually no formal requirements of families, parents engaged in intentional resource acquisition for the purpose of impressing colleges and signaling the suitability of their children as college applicants. The tactics of these homeschooling mothers arguably exceed what is required by parents of public and private school students, whose children earn grades from systems trusted by colleges and can often access institutional resources to bolster their college applications. This difference in parental involvement matters because in order for the parents in this study to be so greatly involved and strategic they had to possess and actively draw upon a high level of knowledge about college. Without a clear understanding of college and college preparation, homeschooling parents in Texas have no structural safety net that can compensate for any gaps in their personal knowledge or skills. Additionally, the homeschooling families of this study demonstrate the gatekeeping power of colleges. Even among this population who have essentially total autonomy over the education of their children, the strong desire of these middle-class parents for their children to attend college means that they ultimately sacrifice some of their control to bend to the will of the college system because they believe that it is their responsibility as parents to ensure that their children can attend college. If parents want their children to be able to take advantage of the benefits of a more selective college education and reproduce their family's privilege (Lee 2013), they have to conform to college admissions standards in order to

convince these institutions that their children would maintain the prestige of the university (Killgore 2009).

A limitation of this study is the lack of data regarding homeschool families in the state. Since Texas homeschool law does not require that homeschooling families register with the state, there is no data on homeschool family demographics nor is there a clear count of the number of families currently engaging in this alternative education practice. Though some national surveys, such as the Parent and Family Involvement survey fielded by the National Center for Education Statistics are able to statistically estimate national trends (McQuiggan et al. 2017), there are still limits to what these data can illuminate. The lack of statewide data means that this study of Houston homeschool families could be unique in ways that are unknown at this time. Though this is a small qualitative study which is generalizable, homeschooling families in Houston may be markedly different than the total population of homeschool families in the state, but there is no way at this time to test this.

Future research should continue to examine homeschool education for high school students. Since much of the existing literature on homeschooling focuses on young children and the initial motivations families have to homeschool (Kunzman and Gaither 2013), there is a lack of literature that considers how homeschool decisions and strategies can change over time as children age. While this study begins the process of unpacking this phenomena, it can only offer a narrow view of how parents structure their homeschools around college preparation. Interviews with parents who homeschool and are working-class or live in rural would help shed light on the variation in strategies that families may use when their resources are more financially or geographically constrained. Comparisons between the findings of this research and future studies that examine homeschool college preparation in states with higher levels of homeschool

regulation would also be beneficial. Lastly, COVID-19 has caused a surge in the number of families choosing to homeschool (Warnick 2020). Though this study cannot speak to the experiences of families educating their children at home due to the pandemic, its findings do suggest that future research evaluating the impacts of COVID-19 on education should strongly consider the role of parental involvement and privilege on home education methods and how these may also be associated with children's age. With so many parents thrust into homeschooling their children unexpectedly, families who can shoulder the financial costs of outsourcing may also see it as the preferred route for keeping their children on the college track.

Interviews with homeschooling parents in the Houston area reveal that these families were largely motivated to homeschool through high school because they believed homeschooling to be the ideal way to prepare their children for college, despite the structural constraints and additional parental responsibilities that come with homeschooling secondary school. However, in order to position homeschooling in the best light for the external evaluation of the college admissions process, parents relied heavily upon outsourced homeschool instruction. The strategic approach to college preparation used by the mothers of this study highlights the dependence of homeschooling in Texas on the knowledge and resources of parents, which works to reproduce privilege for well-resourced families through college acceptance and completion. Furthermore, the desire the parents had for their children to attend college and the adaptations they made to their homeschooling methods to ensure their children could be on the college track speak to the power that the college admissions systems has over educational decisions, even in spaces where parents have near total control over their children's education.

Appendix

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N=22)		
	Full Sample Percentage	Mean
Gender		
Woman	100	
Race		
White	95.5	
Hispanic, non-white	4.5	
Highest Degree Attained		
High School Diploma	9.0	
Associates	13.6	
Bachelors	36.4	
Graduate or Professional	41.0	
Marital Status		
Married	100	
Employment Status		
Employed (part time or full)	54.5	
Not working	45.5	
Household Income¹		\$179,118
Annual Homeschool Spending²		\$3,521.4
Number of Children		3.9
Years Spent Homeschooling		
0-5	13.6	
6-10	31.8	
11-15	13.6	
16+	40.9	
Religious³		
Yes	86.4	
No	13.6	
N		22

¹ Five respondents declined to share their household income.

² Eight respondents declined to share how much they spend on homeschooling annually.

³ Religious affiliation primarily consisted of various Christian faiths, with the exception of one respondent who identified as Pagan.

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