

Potential Access for U.S. Homeschool Students to Participate in Agricultural Education and FFA

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Introduction & Need for Research

Homeschool enrollment is growing (Ray, 2011), resulting in an increasing number of homeschool students utilizing local public school resources as part of their curricula (Planty et al., 2009). The homeschool population represents a potential growth audience for Agricultural Education and FFA (Frick & Brennan, 1998; Weik, 2015). School-based Agricultural Education (SBAE) programs and FFA have the opportunity to broaden their reach and be more inclusive in addressing local community needs by providing access to homeschool students. Homeschoolers typically excel academically and have parents who are involved in their child's education (Ice & Hoover-Dempsey, 2011), both of which are valuable qualities to SBAE programs. Traditionally, SBAE programs and FFA chapters have been exclusively accessible to students enrolled in public schools that offer such programs (Croom, 2008; Talbert et al., 2005). In response to the evolving nature of agriculture and demographics in the 21st century, SBAE programs are broadening their content foci to appeal to a more diverse student population and increase enrollment (Conroy & Kelsey, 2000; Frick et al., 1991; Kahler, 1988; Newcomb et al., 2004; Powell et al., 2008). Despite potential barriers, some SBAE programs have expanded to include the homeschooling community. Inclusion of homeschooled students through either homeschool Agricultural Education programs and FFA chapters or part-time public school enrollment are examples of documented program participation pathways (Massey, 2015; Johnson, 2012). However, limited research has been conducted on the homeschool community and Agricultural Education (i.e., Walls et al., 2001) and no studies were found that identify and summarize relevant state-level education policies regarding homeschool students' part-time enrollment in public schools, Agricultural Education courses, and FFA. The purpose of this study is to describe the potential of homeschool student participation in SBAE and FFA as defined by education-related policies for each of the 50 states.

Conceptual Framework

The study was conceptually framed around three state-level policies: (1) Part-time public school enrollment, (2) homeschooling regulations, and (3) language regarding membership requirements in state FFA constitutions. Three types of part-time public school attendance policies emerged from analyzing compiled data (Current, 2016) and were confirmed by consulting cited legislation: (1) Access to part-time public school enrollment mandated at the state level, (2) part-time public school enrollment prohibited at the state level, or (3) states delegate the power to local school districts to define their own part-time enrollment policies. State homeschooling regulations were categorized based on definitions from the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) (Smith & Farris, 2016): (1) High regulation, (2) moderate regulation, (3) low regulation, and (4) no notice required. State FFA constitutions were analyzed for membership requirement language and three categories emerged: (1) Required enrollment in SBAE course and SAE, (2) required enrollment in SBAE course or SAE, and (3) either of the previous statements with a clause allowing for private or homeschool chapters and/or members.

Methods & Procedures

A qualitative policy analysis using evaluation coding (Saldaña, 2013) examined three data sources: (1) state's part-time public school attendance policy; (2) state's homeschool education policy and regulations, and (3) state's FFA constitutions. An iterative document evaluation

process was implemented using three phases: (1) a preliminary analysis identifying the initial framework of three state-level policy factors; (2) refining codes and categories by developing a rubric and data analysis flowchart defining the importance of factors; and, (3) document analysis using the rubric and data analysis flowchart used to analyze, report, and interpret relevant policies and documents for all 50 states. Results were summarized regarding potential access for homeschool students to participate in SBAE and FFA programs. Reflexivity of the researcher resulted in disclosure of biases and interpretations that were monitored throughout the study. For example, homeschooling regulations were initially hypothesized as the primary determinant of homeschool student access to SBAE and FFA, but as the framework and analyses were reiteratively refined, answering the questions associated with evaluation coding resulted in part-time public school attendance emerging as the state-level gatekeeper policy. The interpretation of homeschool regulation policies also emerged through the evaluation coding process. Initially, policies with more regulations were perceived as limiting access for homeschool students to participate in SBAE and FFA. Upon completion of the evaluative data analysis and interpretation process, policies with different levels of regulation resulted in multiple paths for program participation. Credibility, dependability, and confirmability were established using iterative questioning, negative case analysis, frequent debriefing sessions, peer scrutiny of the research project, direct quotes from documents, detailed and transparent operational field notes, triangulation, admission of researcher's beliefs and assumptions, recognition of limitations, audit trail, and reflexive journaling (Shenton, 2004).

Findings, Conclusions & Recommendations

The 50 states' policy documents resulted in four discrete (color-coded) categories of potential access of homeschool students to participate in SBAE and FFA programs: high potential access (green), moderate potential access (yellow), low potential access (orange), no potential access (red). First, five states in the high potential category (AK, ID, IL, MI, NC) can immediately target homeschool students due to policies already in place that provide access to participation in SBAE and FFA. Twenty-two states in the moderate potential category (AL, AZ, AR, CA, DE, IN, IA, KS, LA, ME, MS, MO, MT, NE, NV, NH, NJ, NM, TX, UT, WI, WY) can target homeschool students, but should consult policy to determine a locally informed access pathway to program participation. Nineteen states in the low potential category (CO, CT, FL, GA, KY, MA, MN, ND, OH, OR, PA, RI, SC, SD, TN, VT, VA, WA, WV) will need to consult policy in order to determine a state-informed access path to program participation, and depending on the state may require a change in policy. Four states in the no potential access category (HI, MD, NY, OK) need to change policy or policies to provide access opportunities to homeschool students to participate in SBAE and FFA. Currently, two states (NC and AK) have defined FFA membership policies for homeschool students (Massey, 2015; Walls et al., 2001). Other states (e.g., IN and MN) allow homeschool students to participate in FFA under the part-time public school attendance provision (Johnson, 2012; Weik, 2015). SBAE courses meeting state's science requirements can be favorable for providing an access pathway for homeschool students. Policy analyses are a starting point to consider expanding access for Agricultural Education and FFA and other possibilities of gatekeeping should be considered. Further research is needed to study knowledge and beliefs of state leaders and in-service teachers in Agricultural Education and FFA regarding homeschooling as well as the barriers and opportunities to provide access for homeschool students to participate in Agricultural Education and FFA.

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