Singer-songwriter Billie Eilish, seen collecting her Grammys, is a product of homeschooling, but it ... [+]

Grammy winner Billie Eilish has become a poster girl for
homeschooling, but for a growing number of families, it is more of a curse than a blessing.

The singer has extolled the virtues of homeschooling, crediting it for helping develop the inventive style that has won her millions of fans around the world, as well as success in last week’s Grammy awards.

But while growing numbers of parents are homeschooling their children, there is evidence that for some of them it is not an option they choose, but one that is forced on them.

For Eilish, homeschooling meant the ability to follow her own interests and nurture her creativity, but for some children it means not so much a personalized education as hardly any education at all.

The number of homeschooled children in the U.S. has virtually doubled in the last 20 years, with latest figures showing almost 1.7 million K-12 children homeschooled, 3.3% of the total.

Concern about the school environment, including drugs and peer pressure, is the most commonly cited reason for U.S. parents choosing to homeschool, identified by around a third of homeschoolers, followed by a dissatisfaction with academic instruction and a desire for religious instruction.

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But in the U.K., the growth of homeschooling is not down to parents
making a positive choice, even if for somewhat negative reasons, but to children being pushed out of schools.

The number of children being homeschooled in England has doubled in just four years, although the lack of an official register means even this number is likely to be an underestimate.

And the principal driver behind the rise is the number of children being “off-rolled,” where parents are persuaded to home-educate as an alternative to their child being excluded, according to the Children’s Commissioner for England.

Many of these children disappear from school rolls in the run-up to exams, prompting fears that schools are targeting students who are not likely to do well in exams, and hence depress the school’s overall league table position.

Often it is the families who are least able to offer an effective home education who are affected.

And the result is a growing number of children whose education is prematurely terminated and who are left to join the workforce without any of the qualifications that could give them a chance in life.

The school inspectorate has attempted to get a grip on the situation, warning that schools found to have removed large numbers of students from their roll without explanation will be marked down.

In practice its response has been less forthright, however, castigating some schools for off-rolling while turning a blind eye to others.

This lack of consistency leaves schools free to exploit the uncertainty and continue to force out students who will have a negative impact on
league table position, and leaves families to pick up the pieces of a truncated education and blighted lives.

The pressure facing school leaders is undoubtedly enormous, and the stakes are frighteningly high, but a system that rewards such behavior is in urgent need of repair.

While Billie Eilish’s experience shows that homeschooling can be a positive choice, and can be enormously rewarding for children, for some families it can leave them picking up their pieces for the rest of their lives.

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