

---

*Akron Beacon Journal*

**A Diverse but United National Network Mobilizes  
Against Regulations at All Levels**

**November 19, 2004**

**Dennis J. Willard and Doug Oplinger**

<<<>>>

Retrieved 1/18/05 from

[http://www.ohio.com/mld/ohio/news/special\\_packages/home\\_schooling/10221555.htm](http://www.ohio.com/mld/ohio/news/special_packages/home_schooling/10221555.htm)

---

**Grass-roots clout**

On a bitter winter evening in this small southwestern Ohio town, more than 200 home-schooling parents, their children and supporters congregated in the Evangelical Community Church pews.

Some were from the neighborhood. Others came from as far as three counties away.

No one traveled farther than the guest speaker. Scott Somerville, an attorney from the Home School Legal Defense Association, flew in from Washington, D.C., to provide the legal muscle and moral certitude for the battle at hand.

Somerville told the group the local school district had accepted information from a home-schooling family, the Garretts, for 12 years without question, but suddenly the rules were changing. The Garretts were asked to provide written details regarding their plans to teach their children fire and safety regulations.

When Somerville told the group about the need to assemble, to petition government and to stand up for its rights, he was preaching to the choir.

The days of home schooling with the shades drawn were over, he noted. Long over.

Twenty years ago, home schoolers were in hiding. Today, home schooling is legal nationwide.

The movement's standing is not happenstance.

Parents are unfettered because few other groups are as effective or as feared as home schoolers. Their tenacious lobbying is widely known, whether they are mobilizing for sustained battles or gearing up in a matter of hours when their interests are threatened. They have shut down parts of the federal government, pressured major corporations to abandon merchandise or

re-examine their advertising, targeted unfriendly lawmakers at the state and national levels, and gone after school officials either in the courtroom or in the court of public opinion.

“To be politically effective, you have to be united,” Somerville told the group. “If you aren't united, you will fall.”

The next day, after a brief meeting with Somerville, the Franklin superintendent, Kimberlee Gray, backed down. The law was on the home schoolers' side.

Gray did not respond over a period of months to multiple telephone calls and voice-mail messages seeking her comments.

Franklin joined a string of victories for lawyers who represent home schoolers against school officials and others who challenge their authority to teach their children without outside interference.

Despite the diversity of parents who teach their own children, when it comes to threats against home schoolers, they unite.

In just the past two years, home schoolers have lobbied successfully in about one-third of the states to further relax regulatory oversight or head off efforts to monitor their activity. In many cases, they have been able to block public discussion of their practices through relentless lobbying and a successful marketing campaign that cites inconclusive research to prove their home-schooled children are excelling academically and socially.

No one has been allowed to challenge any aspect of the home-schooling movement without arousing the scorn of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of families.

Their record is enviable. Their positions have prevailed on such key issues as testing, attendance hours, reporting requirements, parents' making the decision to home-school without local approval, and relaxing standards for parental qualifications to teach.

Home schoolers have fought government paper trails, even ones that grant anonymity to individual families and children. For this reason, it has been difficult for researchers to conduct quantitative or qualitative studies to objectively measure achievement or failure within the movement.

### **Web of influence**

The home-schooling community is the true model for effective grass-roots politics in America.

Unbridled by mandatory school hours, home schoolers show up at legislative hearings, school board meetings and public events with children in tow, using the opportunities to demonstrate unity, to lobby and simultaneously to provide civics lessons for the students.

They have formed hundreds of local chapters across the country in counties, cities and townships where they exchange ideas, provide support and organize outings or other activities to bring families together.

In the Internet age, these organizations have become ground zero for lobbying campaigns large and small.

Home schoolers locally and nationally link through the World Wide Web, talk in chat rooms and post alerts on bulletin boards or other electronic forums. They share information and develop response plans when perceived threats to the movement arise in their area or miles away.

In Franklin, for example, many families were aware of the meeting because the Home School Legal Defense Association had sent two e-mails through an alert system. The dispute also was posted on HSLDA's Ohio news page.

In Ohio, there are scores of local chapters for evangelical Christians, Roman Catholics, "unschoolers" and families of diverse interests.

The Christian Home Educators Stark County Association (CHESCA) is one of the oldest and most active in the state. CHESCA, which has about 145 families as members, encourages fellowship and political involvement, and is "open to like-minded homeschoolers."

Much of the group's Web site is closed to nonmembers.

CHESCA has a political action committee and a Web page dedicated to keeping members informed about issues -- legislation, media coverage and political candidates -- affecting home schooling in Ohio.

"We want to give CHESCA members the best possible advantage when they have to engage their politicians," the site notes.

Members recently could keep abreast of the State Board of Education vote to include creationism in Ohio's science curriculum, the Garrett family's problems in Franklin, an Akron case involving home schoolers and a discussion of the Akron Beacon Journal's efforts to report on the growth of home schooling.

### **Legislator inundated**

Last year, Texas state Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, D-Austin, talked about regulating home schoolers by having parents register with the state. The goal was to help distinguish among truants, dropouts and children legitimately educated at home.

"A significant number of students were not being home-schooled but using it as an excuse not to be grabbed and put back in school -- dropping out and using that (home schooling) as an excuse," Barrientos told the Beacon Journal.

Recognizing that Texas has no agency to check on educational neglect, he also wanted home schoolers to pledge to provide an education.

Texas could be labeled the Wild West of home schooling. Parents can keep their children out of school without notifying school authorities and never file any reports.

The Texas Home School Coalition says the state has the nation's highest proportion of school-age children being home-schooled: as high as 7 percent. So when Barrientos tried to write regulations for home schoolers, he faced stiff resistance.

"All we wanted was for the parent to say to the education commissioner that they were taking complete responsibility for the education of the child," Barrientos said. "And lo and behold, someone said something on the Web somewhere, because we got literally thousands of e-mails saying this was an intrusion on their lives.

"It was like somebody hollered 'Fire!' " Barrientos said.

In one weekend, his office received more than 3,000 e-mails from across the country. His chief of staff, Bruce Hupp, said that from the minute staffers walked in the door on that Monday morning, the phone rang nonstop.

“The tone was nasty,” Hupp said. “They were rude.”

Hupp said it was impossible to explain the senator's position on the bill. Callers didn't want to hear it. Some were reading a scripted statement, so, Hupp said, he instructed staffers to listen, say “thank you” and hang up.

In contrast to the loud response from home schoolers, the legislation died quietly.

### **Congress swamped**

Texas was not the first place that united home schoolers brought a government operation to a standstill. In 1994, they disrupted the U.S. House of Representatives for a few days.

Home schoolers were concerned that an amendment to an education funding bill would require parents to be certified teachers, although the author, U.S. Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., contended that it applied only to public classroom instructors.

Congressional staff lawyers offered similar assurances in a House Education and Labor Committee hearing, but home schoolers were not convinced.

Michael Farris, then president of the Home School Legal Defense Association, sent e-mails to thousands of home schoolers on his Internet alert system and appeared on the 700 Club and radio talk show Focus on the Family with host James Dobson to sound an alarm.

“This bill contains the most dangerous assault on the freedom of home schools and private schools ever seen in recent history,” Farris said in a letter sent to all his organization's members and affiliated home-school groups.

U.S. House telephone lines soon were jammed with thousands of calls and faxes, preventing some members from using their phones for days.

Farris called it the finest hour for home-schooling politics.

Miller's amendment was eliminated. In its place, Farris helped to craft an amendment adopted 374-53 that exempted home schools from all provisions in the education budget bill.

### **Intense fight in Montana**

Last year, Montana state Sen. Don Ryan, D-Great Falls, introduced legislation that would require testing of home schoolers after he had heard troubling stories from public school officials.

A superintendent told Ryan that she had visited a home in Flathead County after hearing that the children were not being educated. Under Montana law, she had no authority to check on the family.

Ryan said that the man who answered the door told the superintendent, “You don't exist. You're an apparition and you don't exist.”

He then slammed the door shut.

Hundreds of home-schooling families and their children descended on Helena. They testified that their test scores are higher than those of children in public schools.

Ryan countered that only a select group of home-schooled children are tested.

“The home-school league doesn't want any interference at all. I was willing to negotiate. My bill was a testing bill,” Ryan said. “You determine the test you want to take. Just take the test, and you can evaluate yourselves as to what you're doing, but you'll have a score.”

Some of the testimony was disturbing.

“One fellow says: ‘I've got three things: I'm pro-life, I'm pro-gun and I'm pro-home school,’ and that was the end of his testimony,” Ryan said.

Ryan saw his bill die that day, but the letters, e-mails and telephone calls didn't stop.

“One lady wrote me and said, ‘It's not fair for you to give me a standardized test because I might not be teaching math and my kids wouldn't score well.’ So why doesn't she teach math?” Ryan said.

He said another letter ended with: “We are not people who will be enslaved by a tyrannical government. Why? Because we will not obey!! Your (sic) in the wrong state to try to pass this kind of legislation. As a Christian and a free man I piss on your head!”

Ryan said he hoped that home schoolers would see aggregate test scores and work to find ways to correct problems. “Good home schoolers would look and want to make sure their scores are not skewed by someone who doesn't want to do a good job,” he said.

### **Taxpayers save**

In addition to lobbying and touting academic and social success stories, home schoolers arrive at statehouses and the U.S. Capitol carrying another issue close to legislators' hearts: They pay taxes and ask for almost nothing in return.

At the same time that most special interest groups are holding their hands out, home schoolers ask lawmakers only to leave them alone.

U.S. taxpayers are saving between \$7.7 billion and \$14.7 billion annually, based on an estimate of 1.1 million to 2.1 million home-schooled children who are not enrolled in public schools. In Ohio, the sum saved ranges from \$238 million to \$420 million annually.

For perspective, Ohio would have to raise its sales tax of 6 cents per dollar to 6.25 or 6.5 cents on the dollar to fully fund education if all the state's home-schooled children shifted to public schools.

Many home schoolers believe public educators attack the movement because they want these children enrolled so that their districts can collect more state and federal aid.

### **Media backlash**

Sensitive to negative media coverage, home schoolers mobilize against newspapers or broadcast outlets that question the effectiveness or safety of their movement.

When CBS News aired a two-part investigative piece, *The Dark Side of Home Schooling*, in October 2003, the home-school network snapped alive with a response. Families were given contact names at CBS, including Dan Rather's, and home schoolers filled CBS phone-message boxes and bombarded the network and its parent, Viacom, with e-mails.

They demanded that the series be stopped before the second installment could be aired, saying the program unfairly connected abuse and murder with home schooling.

A CBS News spokeswoman said the reaction wasn't out of the ordinary for a controversial subject. The second piece ran as scheduled.

Home schoolers also went for CBS' pocketbook by posting the names and addresses of companies that advertised on the evening news.

Pharmaceutical giant Schering-Plough became a target after airing a Claritin advertisement during the first segment of the two-day report. Company spokeswoman Mary-Frances Faraji said the company decided to move its Claritin spot from the second installment because of the negative response.

Schering-Plough isn't the only corporation to bow to home schoolers. J.C. Penney, the department store chain, pulled clothing from its racks after hearing from families. An offending T-shirt had the phrase "home-schooled" emblazoned across the image of an aging mobile home.

The Beacon Journal series on home education, which began publication Sunday, has stirred reaction from all over the country. In the five days since the series began publication, the newspaper has received nearly 300 phone calls, e-mails or entries in its online chat site.

Most of the responses have been from home schoolers and their supporters. They have been critical of the issues addressed by the newspaper, which plans to address and report on those comments after the series has concluded.

### **Lobbying in Columbus**

Home schoolers are influential in Columbus. In 2002, they persuaded lawmakers to amend Ohio's child-labor laws to ensure that parents, not superintendents, decide whether their children's academic progress is sufficient to merit a work permit.

The more conservative Christian home schoolers have joined with others who share their conservative views -- and may not be home schoolers -- to become a powerful force in Columbus. Their lobbying efforts have at times been aimed at issues beyond home education.

Martha Wise said that in her 21 years as a member of the State Board of Education, in which time she has twice been its president, many of the same people lobbying on home-school issues have also lobbied on such issues as creationism and sex education.

"I would tend to think the views of home schoolers would be the views of this far-right, extreme group," she said.

In 2000, Wise said home schoolers lobbied to stop Ohio from accepting an \$855,000 grant from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for sex education in public schools.

"We were trying to put out physical education and health standards for the kids of Ohio, but it was sex education to them," Wise said. "That ilk of people were so upset, we had to back off of the standards and lost most of our CDC money. It was close to a million dollars."

It was this group that she said objected to the "Be Proud, Be Responsible" program that many opponents believed condoned condom use to prevent sexually transmitted disease and unwanted pregnancies. They also voiced concern that the state eventually would be required to include sex education in its model curriculum for health.

Ohio became the first state ever to turn down CDC money -- including six \$10,000 HIV/AIDS grants that would have gone to Akron and five other urban districts.

In that battle, the movement had an ally in then-state Rep. Jim Jordan, R-West Liberty, a conservative Christian who home-schooled his four children with his wife.

Jordan said recently that he would not have been successful in his efforts to pass an amendment to reject the grant without the help of Christian home schoolers. He said they were also instrumental in helping him upset then-state Rep. Jim Buchy, R-Greenville, who was a House floor leader with strong backing from Columbus, in a 2000 Republican primary for a state Senate seat.

Most recently, Wise said, home schoolers and the Christian right successfully lobbied the state board to include intelligent design -- a version of creationism -- in the science curriculum. "The board was swayed by the excessive lobbying. They (members) talked themselves into the idea that there is no creationism in the curriculum. It's there," Wise said.

### **Reluctance to act**

Their strength may be measured by something that has not happened: Home schooling was legalized in Ohio in 1989, and since then, no lawmaker has introduced legislation to further regulate it or to increase accountability for parents and children.

A number of superintendents surveyed by the Beacon Journal indicated that they have expressed their frustrations about home schooling to the state legislators from their area, but the topic was too politically risky.

Bruce Stewart, Clark County Educational Service Center superintendent, said the feedback he received was, "You don't want to mess with home schoolers."

Their negative reaction to any examination of home schooling results in problems' going unaddressed, Stewart said.

In 2003, state Sen. John Carey, R-Wellston, vice chairman of the powerful Senate Finance and Financial Institutions Committee, asked Susan Zelman, state superintendent of public instruction, whether the Education Department was concerned that some parents used home schooling to avoid truancy charges.

When the Beacon Journal wrote about the exchange in the aftermath of the Akron case in which three home-schooled boys had been locked in a closet for days at a time with little food or water, Carey was hit with enough e-mails and telephone calls that he felt compelled to "correct the record."

Carey said he supports home-schooled children and their parents.

"I believe that my comments were misconstrued as I mentioned I had raised concern regarding abusive parents under the guise of home schooling. I did not mention proposing legislation regarding more regulation on home schooling," Carey wrote to home schoolers.

The Beacon Journal had never suggested that Carey was prepared to introduce legislation, and the senator never asked the newspaper to correct or clarify its reporting of his remarks.

Zelman told Carey there were internal discussions regarding the truancy problem and home schoolers, and she would get back to him with more information. More than a year later, the department has not provided Carey's office with information on home schooling.