

Vermont Home Education Network

* PO Box 72 * Woodbury, VT * 05681 * mountainfoldvt@gmail.com * 802.472.5491 * www.vhen.org *

House Education Committee * 1:30 pm * January 27, 2023 * Testimony of Retta Dunlap

Introduction: My name is Retta Dunlap, president of VHEN and am a retired homeschooling mom who homeschooled four children K-12 and has worked for the past 25 years as a statewide advocate for homeschooling here in the State House, with the Agency of Education, and with homeschoolers at large. I am not a lawyer but there is one law that I quite familiar with and its legislative intent and that is 166b the home study statute.

Who are homeschoolers: Vermont homeschooling families come from all walks of life and points of view such as: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Wiccan, Atheist, or Democrat, Republican, Progressive, Libertarian or no label at all. They have college degrees or only high school diplomas and even some without a high school diploma. Some are licensed teachers and some have never taught anyone. As Dr Mitchell Stevens wrote in his book called Kingdom of Children, *“What distinguishes home schoolers from other parents is not their basic understanding of childhood . . . but rather the exceptional extent to which home schoolers have elaborated that understanding and put it into practice.”* Page 70 *This is what VHEN is built on. I homeschooled on purpose as I saw it as a natural progress of raising my own children.*

History of the Statute: ****Pre 1987**** – status of homeschooling in state was approval. ****1987**** – 166b was passed into law removing approval and made this a notification statute, in line with neighboring states. In fact, in 2000, the Vermont Supreme Court confirmed this is a notification statute in the decision concerning Re T.M. or the Maple case, that the statute does not give the state the ability to “approve” of a home study program. The state is to confirm that the enrollment notice is complete with all of the required paper work and that progress was made. I have submitted this case as part of my testimony as it contains a perfect explanation of what the legislator’s intent was in 1987 concerning how enrolling in home study was to work. ****1989**** – The Agency of Education was given a position, called the home study consultant, to oversee the home study program thus give the Agency of 1 FTE for administrative purposes and exactly what the Agency is currently wanting to get back to. ****1998**** – The home study integration law was passed that said all school boards must have a policy of how to handle the integration of a home study student into the public school for a class, sport, or extracurricular activity with .03 of a full-time student reimbursement. ****2006**** – I worked with Com. Richard Cate to make changes to the statute in an attempt to reduce paper work on both families and the then Department of Education. This has turned out that the paper work is as burdensome as ever.

Conclusion: Still, in spite of the paper work, this statute has worked for over 35 years showing that it was a carefully craft statute which satisfies the State’s interest in the education of the child while protecting the liberty of the parent to choose this type of education for their child.

1. **Number of students currently enrolled.** I have all the annual numbers of students that have enrolled at the state level for homeschooling since 1981 and have provided you a chart of those numbers. I have collected these numbers over the years from the AOE and from what I understand they do not collect this type of longitudinal data. As of 10/24/2022 they had received 3,087 student enrollments for 22/23. Parents are still sending in enrollments.
2. **Special Ed.** Homeschooling has shown over and over that many special ed kids do well in homeschooling simply because the family backs into what the child needs and that is primarily a quiet space with a one on one teacher/student ratio. Some homeschooling families have indeed been denied services but as Sec French alluded to there are nuances to the arrangement. So, it is hard to ferret what is going on.
3. **Educational neglect or abuse.** I have heard more than once of a homeschooled child that went back to the public school and was hopelessly behind in math. My response is good, if the family is not getting it done then they should enroll the child back into an institutional setting. I have even worked with families and told them to put their kids back into the public schools as they were not getting it done. I have also heard over the years from parents that the institutional setting is not meeting the educational needs of the child or the child is hopelessly bullied and this is why they are moving to homeschooling. And I have noticed over the years that parents who have trouble being around their children all day will quickly put them back into the institutional setting.

All in all, over 70,000+ children in Vermont have been educated from home and these families have made tremendous changes and had positive experiences even if they only homeschooled for a year or two. Sometimes that is all that is needed to reset the education of a child so they can go back to an institutional setting. Homeschooling is not for everyone.

Kingdom of Children
Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement
By Dr. Mitchell Stevens
2001

Dr. Stevens is a Professor of Sociology at Hamilton College and we can learn a lot about the homeschooling movement in Vermont, from *Kingdom of Children*. Although he studied both religious and non-religious homeschooling for 10 years in the Midwest along with a few national organizations, his book could have been written about Vermont homeschoolers. We are not a homogenous group and our ways of organizing ourselves can be very different. Yet it does not matter where on the political or religious spectrum we find ourselves, we have some powerful ideas that give us some common ground. Dr. Stevens writes:

“The plurality of home schoolers makes them harder for the rest of us to comprehend. On what could fundamentalists and atheists, Muslims and Mormons, Buddhists, and Baptists all agree? I found that despite their varied backgrounds, home schoolers agree that children have enormous potential for distinctive accomplishments and that standardized ways of educating children temper or even squelch this potential. Home schoolers also are wary of state intrusion into family life and generally are skeptical of the ability of bureaucracies and “experts” to meet the task of child rearing. Because these beliefs are rooted in some cherished American cultural traditions, they are compelling to a wide range of people.” Page 5

“... what I found most remarkable about home schoolers was the big item on which they agreed. Time and again, parents told me that their children’s self-development was worthy of virtually any sacrifice.” Page 8

“American civil law has long lent sanctity to the parent-child relationship.” Page 41

“The inherent complexity and uniqueness of each child renders conventional schooling inadequate as well as the philosophies behind it...” Page 43

“What distinguishes home schoolers from other parents is not their basic understanding of childhood ... but rather the exceptional extent to which home schoolers have elaborated that understanding and put it into practice.” Page 70

“[Through] the terms of contemporary childhood.... homeschoolers have shown us what a demanding creature childhood can be. It is cranky about standardized treatment, preferring customized service: from schools certainly, but also from churches and child care providers and the wide array of organization that help parents nurture little selves into maturity. Our contemporary child needs to be understood in all its uniqueness.... from some one or two grown-ups who are heroically committed to putting in the time.....In exchange for the trouble it causes, this childhood offers enormous promise.”