



March 2, 2017

Senator Amy Sinclair
Iowa Legislature

Re: Senator McCoy's bill related to Natalie Finn, SF 138

Dear Senator Sinclair,

Mr. Scott A. Woodruff of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), which lobbies against oversight for homeschooling, recently wrote you a letter opposing SF138 on the grounds that homeschooling is not a risk factor of child abuse. We would like to take this opportunity to correct some of Mr. Woodruff's misunderstandings and to make a few points of our own.

Mr. Woodruff relies heavily on the final report issued by the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities (CECANF), which he states does not mention homeschooling.

However, on page 25 the report states that "analysis of child death review reports showed that *social isolation*, young parents or single parents, caretakers who struggle with mental health issues or substance abuse or domestic violence, and lack of parenting skills are all associated with increased risk of child fatality from abuse or neglect" (emphasis added).

Social isolation [is known to be](#) a risk factor of child abuse, and in cases where homeschooling coincides with abuse, the abusers typically use homeschooling to isolate their children.

In a 2014 study of child torture, Barbara Knox, a University of Wisconsin pediatrician and child abuse researcher, found that 47% of the school-age victims she examined had been withdrawn from school to be homeschooled. "This 'homeschooling' appears to have been designed to further isolate the child and typically occurred after closure of a previously opened CPS case," Knox wrote.

Knox's study points to a pattern of abusive parents using homeschooling to isolate school-age children and render them more vulnerable.

The CECANF report does not identify a comprehensive list of risk factors; instead, it urges states to "conduct a review of all child abuse and neglect fatalities from the previous five years" and to develop a fatality prevention plan fit to their state based on this data (p. 44). Collecting data on homeschooling is difficult (in part because HSLDA opposes such efforts), but several child fatality reviews have made recommendations regarding homeschooling.

After the death of 10-year-old Nubia Barahona in Florida in 2011, an investigative panel conducted a review and [made recommendations](#). The panel noted the role homeschooling played in hiding Nubia's abuse and recommended that DCF "work with the school system and the Department of Education to devise an efficient alert system, with appropriate follow-up inspections, for at-risk children removed from the school system" to be homeschooled.

This recommendation was not implemented. If it had been, it might have saved the life of Janiya Thomas, a 10-year-old Florida girl whose death was discovered in 2015.

In November 2012, Pennsylvania's Task Force on Child Protection [issued recommendations](#) after conducting a review of child fatalities. Based on testimony it received, the task force included draft legislation that would require a risk assessment when a child was withdrawn from school to be homeschooled within 18 months of a founded abuse or neglect report.

When this legislation was introduced, Mr. Woodruff's organization, HSLDA, [opposed it](#).

In his letter, Mr. Woodruff repeatedly affirmed the CECANF report's emphasis on monitoring children with past child abuse or neglect reports. However, HSLDA has a long history of opposing efforts to monitor children with past child abuse or neglect reports.

On page 96, the CECANF report recommends that state legislatures "require that state entities share real-time electronic information between agencies engaged in protecting children (especially law enforcement, CPS, public health agencies, hospitals and doctors, schools, and early childhood centers)." HSLDA has frequently opposed legislation to create such information-sharing systems.

We know that required contact with mandatory reporters can protect homeschooled children.

In 2005, 11-year-old Iowan Sarah Neely was withdrawn from school to be homeschooled after teachers became concerned about her weight loss. Her father homeschooled under the supervision of a certified teacher. When he began skipping meetings without explanation, this teacher called the police, who found Sarah alone, locked in an empty room with foil-covered windows and no light bulb. Her father said he was punishing her for stealing food.

Iowa law changed in 2013, and parents are now permitted to homeschool with no academic assessment and no required contact with mandatory reporters.

Had this law not been changed, Natalie Finn might still be alive.

We urge you to take Sen. McCoy's concerns seriously and work to ensure that abusive parents cannot use homeschooling to isolate children and conceal abuse.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Rachel Coleman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Rachel Coleman, Executive Director
Coalition for Responsible Home Education