

I was homeschooled under Virginia's religious exemption statute. I am submitting this testimony to explain how the lack of accountability and unrestricted ability to limit my education for religious reasons impacted my education and mental health, and how it continues to affect me to this day.

My parents homeschooled me for my entire primary and secondary education. My parents and their haphazard "curriculum" were the only instructional resources I had. Since my father worked away from the home, my mother led much of my instruction. When I was young, she would often get frustrated when I struggled to understand her lessons, often leading to verbal and, at times, physical abuse. My parents did not use an existing curriculum, preferring to randomly piece together 19th century materials and other information not relevant to a 21st century education. Despite this, I surpassed my mother's educating abilities when I was 12. At this point, school time became about subjects that she liked. For other subjects like math, science and languages, I was literally handed a book and told to "learn it." I'm sure you can figure out what a young boy with no resources and little supervision did in that circumstance.

Because of my parents' beliefs, most of what passed for a school curriculum was presented from a strict, Christian point of view and anything that didn't present a Christian worldview was branded as "ungodly" and outrightly dismissed. Anatomy books had the pages about the reproductive system glued shut because they may "lead to sinful thoughts". Because of my parent's religious beliefs, I was never taught about sex, safe or otherwise, leading me to experiment on my own and to many unsafe situations that caused bodily harm. I was taught that acts of genocide caused by Christians (namely the Crusades, religious wars, and colonization) were justified and that slavery was good. Any other religion or worldview outside Christianity was "evil" because it did not align with their singular ideology. I wasn't allowed to explore other perspectives, and it took years for me to adjust to life outside of my parents' home because I was not prepared to handle people with differing beliefs.

Many homeschoolers utilize co-ops to enhance children's education and provide opportunities for socialization. Despite the existence of 3 local co-ops, I was not allowed to participate, even though all the subjects were taught in a religious context. I was denied the opportunity to learn with my peer group even in a religious environment, proving that my parents were using the auspices of religion to continue neglecting my education.

Throughout my secondary education, I distinctly remember two periods where my education failed to progress. The first was when my mother stopped all my education to focus on a single literature study, setting me back a whole year in core subjects. The second period was the 18 months surrounding my sister's birth. During this time, my mother made no preparations for my education and as a result, I did not complete any schoolwork during a time where I should have been actively preparing college applications. Because of the religious statute, I lost over two years of critical instructional time.

As a minor wanting to learn and knowing I was behind my peers, I begged my parents for years to let me go to a public or private school. I was repeatedly told that the education I was receiving at home was "far superior". My desires to educate myself outside the home were repeatedly

rejected by the people who were supposed to be responsible for my education. There was no oversight to ensure I was even learning anything.

I have seen my sister go through a similar educational experience, which has only been exacerbated by her learning and mental health struggles and my parents' increasing lack of patience. My parents even completely ignored the basic legal requirement to obtain a religious exemption for her. Only after a CPS report for educational neglect was filed did my parents follow the law and obtain a religious exemption. My sister was 14 when my parents finally filed for the religious exemption; there was no investigation into the previous 9 years where my parents neglected her education. My parents were able to skip years of foundational education because there was no accountability. The educational neglect continues, it is just now technically "legal" because the religious exemption statute provides no protection whatsoever for children, even when they are not being educated. Now at 17, she is at least 3 years behind peers of the same age.

Despite both children begging for a traditional education in a school or a co-op, our parents refused to divert from their preconceived determination to homeschool under a religious statute. My mother, who is supposed to be the primary "educator", is not emotionally or psychologically stable, choosing to prioritize religious material, her hobbies and frivolous ventures rather than provide a consistent and complete education to her children. The current state of the religious exemption statute in Virginia allows for complete autonomy for the parents and provides no protections for the children. Parents can legally not educate their children at all with no repercussions. The children, many of whom, like myself, are now adults, have to deal with the consequences resulting from an incomplete education. How is this in the best interest of the child and future adult? Teachers in schools are held to certain standards for the educational progress of the students in their care. Should parents who choose to teach their children at home not be held to any standard? I would be much further along in my life if someone had been checking to make sure what I was learning was on track with where I needed to be and been able to hold my parents accountable for gaps in my education. It's too late for me and, sadly, too late for my sister. Please don't let our story be repeated.

Signed,
JM