



**CRHE Executive Director Rachel Coleman's Testimony before Iowa
Government Oversight Committee Members**

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Thank you for having me here.

My name is Rachel Coleman, and I am the executive director of the Coalition for Responsible Home Education, a national nonprofit that advocates for homeschooled children. CRHE was founded by homeschool alumni, including myself, in 2013. We raise awareness of the need for homeschooling reform, provide public policy guidance, and advocate for responsible home education practices. Our vision is for homeschooling to be a child-centered educational option, used only to lovingly prepare young people for an open future.

I was homeschooled from kindergarten through high school. I attended university on scholarship and went on to get my master's degree in twentieth century U.S. history. I wrote my master's thesis on homeschooling. I next began a Ph.D. in U.S. history at Indiana University. In 2011, I received a call from my teenage brother. He told me he was worried about a friend of his whose home was physically abusive and educationally neglectful. Like him, she was being homeschooled. Prior to this point, I had not thought about the problems that would accompany being homeschooled in an abusive home.

This experience, along with stories of educational neglect and abusive home environments I heard as I became involved in various alumni circles, made me an advocate of homeschool reform. Homeschooling can be a positive, child-centered educational option that provides a sound education in a loving home environment--but it is not always. Homeschooling gives parents power. When that power is exercised wisely, the experience can be profoundly positive; when that power is exercised in malicious and abusive ways, children can die.

In our advocacy for homeschooled children, we address two primary problems: educational neglect and child abuse. Educational neglect is a serious problem. I have spoken with a large number of young adults held back from obtaining their goals by inadequate homeschool educations. One young woman I spoke with recently would like to begin a bachelor's degree in sociology, but cannot because she received no math education while being homeschooled. We need to create academic standards for homeschooling, especially during the high school years. No child should be held back because of a deficient homeschool education. But that is not what I'm here to talk to you about today. Today I'm here to talk to you about child abuse.

Themes in Child Abuse and Homeschooling

CRHE runs the Homeschooling's Invisible Children database, which includes nearly 400 cases of severe or fatal child abuse in homeschool settings to date. A number of these cases occurred in Iowa, including that of Natalie Finn, a sixteen-year-old girl in West Des Moines who died of starvation and severe abuse in October of last year.

We created this database in part so that we could locate themes and point to solutions. I want to take this opportunity to outline some of the themes we have identified.

Sixteen-year-old Calista Springer died in a house fire in 2008 because she was unable to free herself from her collar. Yes, collar. Calista was made to wear a dog collar and was chained to her bed. (This is actually not the only story I could tell you of a homeschooled child who died in a house fire because she was chained to her bed. Ten-year-old Molly Holt suffered the same fate in Louisiana in 2003.) Calista attended public school until she was thirteen. Her teachers could tell that something was wrong, and reported their concerns to child services. Her parents withdrew her from school to prevent her teachers from making additional reports.

This story replays over and over and over again in our database. Jeannette Maples. Teddy Folz-Tedesco. Conrad Morales. Minnet and Jasmine Bowman. Raijon Daniels. Chandler Graves. Chrystal Ramirez. Trenay Duchane. Genesis Sims. Nubia Barahona. Christian Choate. Zahra Baker. Erica Lynn Parsons. Ame Deal. Markea Berry. Isaiah Torres. All of these children were removed from school to be homeschooled following child protective services investigations. All of them went on to die of abuse at their parents' hands.

A history of past child services reports and intervention is the number one theme we see in the homeschool child fatalities we review. In many of these cases, homeschooling begins after the closure of a child services case or child abuse investigation.

I want to speak for a moment about Emani Moss, a ten-year-old Georgia girl who died in 2013. Several years before she was homeschooled, Emani was temporarily removed from the home due to a founded abuse report. She was eventually returned to the home and, in late 2010, the case was closed. In May 2012 a teacher reported welts on Emani's back, but child services determined that these marks fell within the legal limits of parental discipline in Georgia. After that, Emani's parents removed her from school to homeschool her. This did not raise any red flags because Georgia does not have a system for flagging cases where parents pull a child to homeschool after child services contact. In fact, *no state* has such a flagging system. Emani's emaciated body was found burned, in trash cans outside of her family's home. The medical examiner determined that she had died of starvation.

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 who was homeschooled with no additional monitoring despite numerous past child services reports. Janiya's body was found in a freezer in October 2015. At that time, she had been dead for over a year. No one had noticed, because there was no requirement that anyone see her or check in with her in any form.

In 2012, Pennsylvania's Task Force on Child Protection [made similar recommendations](#) after conducting a review of the state's 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. This legislation was introduced into the state senate in 2013, but faced staunch opposition from homeschool groups that cared more about insisting that child abuse and homeschooling have nothing to do with each other than they did about protecting children.

There is some reason to believe that homeschooling may be overrepresented in severe cases of child abuse among school-aged 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 removed from school to be homeschooled. According to Knox, “[t]his ‘homeschooling’ appears to have been designed to further isolate the child and typically occurred after closure of a previously opened CPS case.” Knox further stated that this isolation “was accompanied by an escalation of physically abusive events.”

The problem is not that homeschooling parents are more likely than other parents to abuse their children overall; in fact we have no conclusive data on this. The problem is that when homeschooling occurs in an abusive home, the ordinary safeguards in place to protect school-age children disappear. Based on the number of fatalities we have in our database, the number of children who are homeschooled, and national child abuse data, we believe that the rate of child fatality is higher among school-aged children who are homeschooled or not enrolled in school than it is among other school-aged children who attend school. This brings us to another theme we identified among the cases in our database -- social isolation.

Mitch Comer was withdrawn from school after eighth grade and spent four years locked in a bedroom in his parents’ Georgia home. When he was discovered, the family’s neighbors were shocked--they had had no idea the family even had a teenage son. In many cases in our database, neighbors either did not know of the abused children’s existence, or reported that they rarely saw the child. In some cases only one child in a family is subject to such isolation, singled out for abuse while the other children are allowed to play outside.

I do not mean to suggest that social isolation is the automatic result of homeschooling. It isn’t. Most homeschooled children are engaged in a range of social activities. However, the social interaction that a homeschooled child receives is entirely up to the parent. There is currently nothing in Iowa’s homeschool law to prevent a homeschooling parent from isolating their children from any contact with an individual outside the family -- or from locking a child alone in a room in complete isolation. Abusive parents take advantage of this reality.

Social isolation does not have to be as extreme as it was in Mitch Comer’s case to create serious consequences. Consider the case of Hana Williams, an adopted child from Ethiopia who died of abuse in 2011. Carri Williams, Hana’s adoptive mother, spoke frankly with her friends about her dislike for Hana, saying she regretted adopting Hana and that she was looking for a way to legally kick her out of the house, but these friends did nothing. Hana may have had access to adults outside of her immediate family, such as her parents’ friends at church, but

were they adults who would have listened to and believed her? Hana lacked access to a trusted teacher or guidance counselor she could have gone to for help; there was no school nurse or social worker to notice the many signs she was being abused.

I want to touch briefly on three additional themes we've noticed: food deprivation, adoption, and disabilities. While children who attend school have access to food through school lunch programs, and to adults who may notice if a child is always hungry, this is not the case with children who are homeschooled. A full 46% of the cases in our database, or nearly half, involved some form of food deprivation. In addition, a disproportionate number of the cases in our database -- 27% -- involve children who were adopted. In many of these cases, the adopted child or children were singled out for abuse and treated differently.

Many of the cases in our database also involve children with disabilities. Most states, Iowa among them, do not require that homeschooled children with special needs have access to any services. There is no followup to ensure that children are seeing therapists or receiving the medical attention they need. Last month a homeschooled child in Kentucky rotted to death from sepsis and bed sores. He had not been moved from his bed for six months. Children with disabilities are often especially vulnerable; when states do not set standards for the care of homeschooled children with special needs, some will fall through the cracks.

Our Recommendations

Over the past three years, we have crafted a series of recommendations to protect at-risk homeschooled children. Our recommendations are threefold: background checks; a flagging system; and regular contact with mandatory reporters.

1. Background checks: In many cases, parents who use homeschooling as a cover for abuse have previously been convicted of violent crimes or crimes against children. For this reason, we recommend preventing homeschooling in cases where parents have been convicted of violent crimes, sexual offenses, crimes against children, or other offenses that would disqualify them from teaching or volunteering in a public school.

At this time, only two states bar homeschooling based on criminal offenses: Pennsylvania and Arkansas. Pennsylvania prohibits homeschooling when a member of the family has committed a crime that would prevent them from teaching in a public school, in line with our recommendations. Arkansas prohibits homeschooling when there is a registered sex offender in the home. Unfortunately, neither state enforces these provisions in a meaningful way.

2. A flagging system: Parents who use homeschooling as a cover for abuse frequently have concerning histories of involvement with child protective services. For this reason, we recommend barring homeschooling in households where an any adult has had a child removed from the home due to substantiated abuse allegations. We further recommend creating a system for monitoring homeschooling families who have a concerning history of child abuse

reports or who have open child protective cases. This recommendation will require communication between local school districts and child protective services.

One way to create such a flagging system might be through the risk assessment requirement recommended by Pennsylvania's 2012 Task Force on Child Protection, which would apply to every family withdrawing a child from school with a founded child abuse report in the previous 18 months. The Kentucky state senate is currently considering a similar proposal, which would bar homeschooling when families have a previous founded child abuse report.

3. Contact with mandatory reporters: We recommend ensuring that homeschooled students have contact with mandatory reporters several times each year. Such contact has the potential to identify cases where children are experiencing severe abuse or starvation; contact with mandatory reporters can also offer abused children a safe adult to turn to. Parents who use homeschooling as a cover for abuse often also do not educate their children; for this reason, we suggest wrapping some mandatory reporter contact into an annual academic assessment requirement. We also recommend requiring homeschooled students to have the same medical visits required of students who attend public school.

In 2015, Michigan state representative Stephanie Chang introduced a bill that would have required all homeschooled children in the state to meet with a mandatory reporter at least twice each year. The mandatory reporter, whether a doctor, teacher, or member of the clergy, would fill out a form stating that they had seen the child and the child appeared to be fine. Sen. McCoy's bill is similar to Rep. Chang's bill in its focus on mandatory reporter contact. Ensuring that children have contact with mandatory reporters should not be seen as intrusive or difficult for any reasonably homeschooling parent to accomplish.

Sen. McCoy's Legislation

Iowa's homeschool law includes three different legal avenues for homeschooling, offering the perfect opportunity to give parents options while ensuring student safety.

When I last spoke with Sen. McCoy, I noted that with only small tweaks to his legislation parents could choose between homeschooling under the supervision of a certified teacher, having their children's academic progress assessed at the end of each year, and child well-checks, which could take place at the school or school district rather than in the family's home. I further suggested that parents could use a note from their children's doctor to satisfy one well-check requirement per year. This would ensure that children have contact with mandatory reporters -- a supervising teacher, a test administrator or portfolio reviewer, or a doctor or school official -- while giving parents room to choose which option they prefer.

I believe that contact with mandatory reporters has the potential to save lives.

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 her under the supervision of a certified teacher. When he began skipping meetings without explanation, the teacher called the police, who found Sarah alone, locked in an empty room with foil-covered windows and no lightbulb. Her father said he was punishing her for stealing food. Sarah was removed from her father's custody and sent to live with her mother in Germany.

Iowa's homeschooling law changed in 2013, allowing parents to homeschool with no academic assessment and no required contact with mandatory reporters. Had this law not been changed, Natalie Finn, whose tragic death this past October spurred Sen. McCoy to introduce his legislation, might still be alive, just as Sarah Neely is.

Sarah Neely is not the only abused homeschooled child to benefit from access to mandatory reporters. In 2014, an 11-year-old girl being homeschooled through Ohio Virtual Academy asked her online teacher to call 911. She and her younger sister and brother were being beaten with belts and tied naked to their beds with chains, released only to complete their schoolwork. The girls were also being raped by their step-father. The online teacher reported the situation to authorities, and the children were removed from the home. If the children had not been homeschooled through a virtual charter program, they would not have had an online teacher to reach out to. Would there have been anyone else for them to go to?

Contact with mandatory reporters is not too much to ask.

Concluding Thoughts

I have spent the past three years advocating for homeschooled children at risk of child abuse or neglect. We frequently receive emails from worried friends and relatives of homeschooled children. In some cases these children's parents have a history of drug abuse; in other cases there is ongoing domestic violence in the home. Hearing these stories has opened my eyes to the breadth of the homeschool experience. While some homeschooled children grow up in stable, happy homes, others live in an environment of violence, isolation, and fear.

And yes, some of these requests for help concern homeschooled children in Iowa.

The most heartbreaking emails I read come from grandmothers of children in unstable or violent homes. Most of these grandmothers have made reports to child services; many have been cut off from contact with their grandchildren as a result. I recall one email in particular. It was from a woman who told me that she could handle losing contact with her grandchildren, if only she knew that they were being seen regularly by mandatory reporters who cared about them and who would notice and say something if things took a turn for the worst.

I have spoken with other grandmothers as well -- grandmothers of children who have died from abuse that was hidden by homeschooling. Several months ago I had a long conversation with

the grandmother of Adrian Jones, a seven-year-old homeschooled boy in Kansas whose body was fed to the family's pigs after he was starved to death. His story is one of the most upsetting I have ever heard. I was shaking when the conversation ended. I cannot imagine what it must be like for his grandmother to have to live with this every day.

It does not have to be this way. We can -- and must -- do better by these children.

Let me finish with a brief summary of some of the points I have covered today.

- There is reason to believe that homeschooling is overrepresented in severe cases of child abuse, likely because homeschooling gives abusive parents the ability to isolate their children in a way they could not if their children attended school.
- Our Homeschooling's Invisible Children database points to several themes, including a history of contact with child services, withdrawal from school after a child abuse report, social isolation, food deprivation, adoption, and disabilities.
- We recommend a three-part system for protecting at-risk homeschooled children: background checks, a flagging system, and contact with mandatory reporters.
- We can point to specific cases where having contact with mandatory reporters has saved a homeschooled child from an abusive situation.

Children cannot create laws. Children cannot vote, or hold office. It is up to us to create change. Those of you sitting here in this room today have the opportunity to create that change, and the time for change is now.

Thank you.

Appendix:

[Report of the Task Force on Child Protection, Pennsylvania, 2012](#)

[Senate Bill 181, Kentucky, 2017](#)