

NATIONAL COALITION FOR CHILD PROTECTION REFORM

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To the Editor:

There's a cliché that hard cases make bad law. There should be a corollary: Horror stories make horrible laws. That is the case with the proposed legislation to ban from homeschooling any parent who winds up on a Department of Children and Families blacklist of alleged child abusers.

After the death of Jacqueline "Mimi" Torres-García, some lawmakers rushed to tar all homeschoolers with the same brush. Legislation now before the State Senate would ban from homeschooling any parent who is listed on the state's central register of alleged child abusers.

That probably conjures up a list of people convicted in court of brutalizing their children. In fact, one can be listed on the register if a caseworker simply checks a box on a form declaring that she or he has "reasonable cause to believe" the allegation is true. And the overwhelming majority of the time, the allegation won't be brutal abuse, but "neglect" which often means that the family is poor. The parent can appeal, but the only appeal before a parent is listed goes to a hearing officer working for DCF itself.

The bill also would ban from homeschooling anyone who shares a household with someone who has an open case with the Department of Children and Families. In Connecticut, 25% of all children, 34% of Hispanic children and 42% of Black children will, at some point, be living in such a household – and overwhelmingly the reports leading to those investigations will be found to be false.

One final note: It's easy to stereotype anyone who defends homeschoolers as a right-wing religious fanatic. For the record, I'm old enough to have cast my first vote in a presidential election for George McGovern and my most recent vote in a contested presidential primary for Elizabeth Warren. I take no position on homeschooling as an educational issue; that's not my area of expertise. But just like any other disfavored group, homeschoolers should not be singled out for special surveillance and discrimination in the name of making everyone feel better after a child abuse horror.

Let all the time and effort that would be directed to this pointless new form of family policing be directed instead toward strengthening prevention when poverty is confused with neglect, and strengthening investigation when something more than a family's educational choices raise suspicion.

Sincerely,
Richard Wexler
Executive Director