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Experts: CT lack of homeschooling oversight invites child abuse; 10% had confirmed abuse or neglect





Homeschool families rally at the state Capitol Monday in opposition to proposed increased oversight. Credit: Livi Stanford/Hartford Courant

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Justin Bennett and his wife, Lauren Bennett, made the decision to [homeschool](#) all four of their children because they say that it allows them to provide individualized attention to each child and to meet them where they are with their needs and interests, while also teaching a curriculum aligned to their Christian beliefs.

“We want to know and be able to determine what they’re studying and what their curriculum is and what they are being exposed to at what ages,” Justin Bennett, a Lisbon resident said. “A significant part is we want to be the people that are determining and motivating the character development in our kids as opposed to leaving it to the state to decide how to develop their character.”

Lauren Bennett, a former public charter school teacher with a master's degree in elementary education, is teaching her children at home because she says the school system was unable to meet her children's individual needs.

The Bennetts are part of a growing number of parents homeschooling their children; An estimated 22,000 in the state choose the alternative form of education, according to [The Education Association of Christian Homeschoolers](#).

But those numbers are not definitive since there is no data confirming the total number of homeschoolers in Connecticut, which is one of 12 states with no regulation of homeschooling.

All other New England states require some form of annual evaluation and two require pre-approval of the parent's homeschooling plan before the parent is permitted to homeschool, according to a May report released from the [Office of Child Advocate](#).

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Homeschooling regulation in the state became the center of debate this week when the legislature's Education Committee and the Committee on Children held a joint hearing to discuss the state's homeschooling policies, with both the Office of the Child Advocate and the Connecticut Association of Public School Superintendents calling for increased oversight of homeschooling. They suggested possibly an annual evaluation or a portfolio or a standardized test, arguing that current law does not provide a way for educators to ensure children are receiving an equitable education and are kept safe.

The discussion comes on the heels of a [disturbing case](#) where a 32-year-old man was allegedly held captive and abused by his stepmother in a Waterbury residence for 20 years. The alleged victim told investigators he was withdrawn from school at 11 years old after being told to lie to DCF and say everything was fine, according to the warrant affidavit.

While several legislators said there is no proposed legislation at this time to regulate homeschooling, they acknowledge it could happen this session, and argue for the need to regulate the practice to protect children. Some child abuse experts have said adding regulations would not necessarily protect children from abuse unless it includes measures to ensure parents do not have a history of child abuse.

Meanwhile, homeschool parents continue to raise concerns about any legislation enforcing regulations, stating that they should have the freedom to educate their children without intrusion from the government. They state further that legislators are using the Waterbury case as an opportunity to restrict their freedom to teach their children.

Republican legislators including Connecticut House Republican Leader Vincent Candelora of North Branford showed support for homeschoolers asserting that the joint hearing was an attempt to deflect responsibility from the government and the failure of the Department of Children and Families.

Religion and individual needs

Jonathan Bennett's eyes widen when speaks about homeschooling. The 9-year-old said he enjoys having the opportunity to study the American Revolution and the Civil War in one day.

And his father, Justin Bennett, says homeschooling all four of his kids, including Micah, 6, Nathanael, 4 and Hannah, 1, also provides him the flexibility to take field trips with his children to all kinds of historic places.

He also lauded the number of abundant resources available for homeschool parents, citing The Education Association of Christian Homeschoolers (TEACH) as helpful, among others.

Donna Person, vice president of TEACH, said she believes that the state wants to control the worldview of children "so they can turn them into what they want."

She said TEACH defines homeschooling as "instruction primarily received in the home or family unit, directed by the parent, without government funding."

"Connecticut law does not require a person to take the initiative to show public school officials that the child is receiving an equivalent education," she said. "Of course, the mere fact that the child is not enrolled in public school should not be construed by public school officials as indicating that the child is not receiving equivalent instruction in the studies taught in the public school."

Based on her observations in her 25 years of homeschooling five children and getting to know hundreds of homeschool families, Person said the reasons that motivate families to begin homeschooling have changed more than the reasons that motivate them to continue.

"Homeschooling is not an educational option as much as it is a lifestyle choice," Person said. "It is an extension or more comprehensive form of parenting and as such any parent is equipped to do so."

But she acknowledged that homeschooling takes time in academics and building character and healthy relationships.

"Starting in 2016 or later I got more and more people calling who knew nothing about homeschooling but only that they could not send their child back to school even one more day because of the trauma they were experiencing there," she said.

Diane Connors, president of the Connecticut Homeschool Network, said the pioneers started homeschooling because "they mostly wanted to bring their children up in an environment.

"That has been changed for quite a while now," she said. "It is to have a better quality curriculum and safety."

Casey Cobb, Neag professor of education policy at the University of Connecticut, said in his research, parents mainly choose homeschooling for faith-based reasons and because they don't believe the public schools are serving their children well.

Trends of homeschoolers

Cobb acknowledged there is not a lot of data around the population of homeschooled students because parents are not required to fill out a form informing the district they are withdrawing their child to school to homeschool them.

“Homeschooling is growing and it is becoming more nuanced with some cottage industries seeing it as a business opportunity” providing curriculum for parents, he said.

According to Cobb’s book, “Public and Private Education in America,” “roughly 1.7 million students in the country are homeschooled, accounting for 3.3% of the student population.

TEACH asserts that the home-educated score on average is “15 to 30 percentile points above public school students on standardized academic achievement tests,” citing Brian D. Ray, president of the National Home Education Research Institute.

But Cobb calls into question Ray’s research, adding in his book that while “much of the research on homeschooling has been pursued over the last three decades, ... most of it has been based on weak designs and methods that are ill suited to address cause and effect.”

Cobb also states that the problem with Ray’s research is he is a “little too biased.”

[The Washington Post](#) reported in an article that Ray’s “samples are not randomly selected and .. much of his research has been funded by a powerful home-schooling lobby group.”

Waterbury Superintendent Darren Schwartz said last year almost 100 students left the school system to transition to homeschooling.

He said there is no apples-to-apples way to gauge how well homeschool students are doing academically compared to public school students.

The Coalition for Responsible Home Education told the Courant without “data on how many children are being homeschooled in states like Connecticut, it’s difficult to ascertain whether children are being educated or not.”

Calling for further regulations

In the Waterbury case, DCF was reportedly alerted 21 times that the child may have been suffering abuse.

The man was allegedly kept isolated and locked in a 8-foot by 9-foot storage room without any heat or air conditioning and no connection to the outside world aside from a radio he used to keep track of time, according to the arrest warrant affidavit.

Kimberly Sullivan was taken into police custody on March 12, a day after police obtained an arrest warrant for her.

Sullivan, 56 was charged with first degree unlawful restraint, cruelty to persons and first-degree reckless endangerment. She pleaded not guilty to all the charges against her.

Waterbury Mayor Paul K. Pernerewski Jr. said Thursday that it does not appear that anyone was trying to teach the man, who was a child at the time and is known as ‘S’.

“It appears that they pulled him out of school, concerned about the oversight,” he said. “This was designed to cover up the fact that he was being mistreated.”

The Office of Child Advocate stated in its May report that “some parents and guardians withdraw their children from school, isolate their children, shield themselves from reports to our child welfare agency and neglect or abuse their children.

“We as a state have enabled this to occur through our lack of statutory requirements and regulations,” the report stated.

The report states further when a child is withdrawn from the stated purpose of homeschooling it “generally does not come to the attention of DCF because the act of withdrawing alone is not an adequate basis filing a report with DCF.

“When there is a report to DCF, it is, at times, the absence of regulation that confounds the child welfare system,” the report states.” While the statute requires that parents be able to show that the child is elsewhere receiving equivalent structure, CSDE’s existing guidance provides only suggestions for annual enrollment and portfolio review. There is no required follow up of any kind.”

The report cites OCA’s 2025 sampling of statewide data of students who were withdrawn for homeschooling, yielding similar results to data from six districts in 2018, the report said.

“Nearly one-quarter of families of students withdrawn for homeschooling had at least one accepted DCF report and approximately 8% had four or more accepted DCF reports,” the report states. “In our 2025 data review, we found that approximately 10% of the families had at least one substantiation, including substantiations for physical abuse, physical neglect, and educational neglect.”

Connors questions the data, claiming that the OCA simply cherry picked the data.

The report cites three cases of children abused after they were removed from school.

First, it mentions the report on the death of [Matthew Tirado](#), a 17-year-old boy with autism who died in 2017 from starvation, dehydration and abuse, according to the report. The report states that the mother removed her child from school for the stated purpose of homeschooling.

In 2023, the report cites another case of a child “found locked away and being abused after his parent removed him from school for the stated purpose of homeschooling.”

Elizabeth Bartholet, professor of law emeritus at Harvard Law School and expert in child welfare and homeschooling, said although it may look like Connecticut is the only state in New England with no regulations for homeschooling, none of the 50 states have anything adequate in the way of regulations to prevent potential child abuse.

“There is a real risk,” she said. “Even in the states where they have some semblance of regulation on paper, it is not enforced.”

“There is no protection against abuse,” she said.

“Homeschoolers are at risk of abuse. There is no protection for those kids.”

She said it is important that regulations are put in place that check on the qualifications of parents to homeschool, including a check with the child protection agency.

“If the parent has a history of serious abuse and neglect, they should be disqualified,” she said.

She said the United States is unique when it comes to homeschooling, adding that many countries do not allow homeschooling or allow it with stringent regulations.

The Homeschooling’s Invisible Children database through the Coalition for Responsible Home Education “analyzed over 400 cases of abuse and neglect, which have resulted in over 200 fatalities of homeschool children, including in Connecticut.”

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Rep. Jennifer Leeper, D-Fairfield, chair of the Education Committee, said there is no proposed legislation at this time and that she is saddened because the legislature is trying to address laws regarding children exiting the school system that the homeschool community believes it is a reflection of them.

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