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How will a Michigan homeschool registry make students safer?

Politicians who advocate the idea will not answer the question

By Jarrett Skorup | January 2024

Democratic political leaders are using a tragic event — which may have little or nothing to do with homeschooling — to call for more regulations of families teaching their own children. They claim that forcing homeschool parents to register with the state will protect kids, but no one has explained how that would work.

Two Michigan couples were arrested in December 2023 for, in the words of the Detroit Free Press, allegedly conspiring “to adopt dozens of children and then cover up physical and psychological abuse ‘all for personal financial gain.’” The four individuals had previously been charged but judges dismissed the cases for lack of evidence.

The Flore and Brown families apparently have had nearly 30 children placed with them for foster care since 2007. Joel Brown, one of those charged, worked for the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. This state employee allegedly worked together with the Flores to receive more than \$1 million from the state for fostering these children.

Attorney General Dana Nessel held a press conference to announce the charges, but she ignored the state’s failure to discover that one of its own employees had engaged in suspected child abuse. Nessel instead blamed homeschooling. “All the children were

homeschooled,” she said. She later tweeted, “The homeschooling environment allowed abuse in the Flore home to go unnoticed; implementing monitoring mechanisms is crucial to ensure that

all children, including those homeschooled, receive necessary protections.”

Other political leaders followed suit.

- Sen. Dayna Polehanki, D-Livonia, and chair of the Senate Education Committee also suggested more regulations are necessary, with “the purpose being to figure out if there are kids in Michigan, and how many, who aren’t being educated at all.”

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- Shortly after, the Democratic-controlled State Board of Education joined the fray. “This is just about providing safety for children across the state of Michigan and making sure that all children are accounted for,” Pamela Pugh, president of the board, said.
- State superintendent Michael Rice sent a letter to legislators asking them to force parents of private schools and homeschool parents to register with the state. “Knowing where all children are enrolled in an educational setting is an issue of student safety, neither more nor less,” he wrote.

Despite all these tweets, press releases and letters, not one public official has explained how forcing homeschooling parents to register with the state would make children safer. Even the link between homeschooling and the situation with the Flores and Brown families is unclear. Since this alleged case of child abuse involved a state employee manipulating state rules, it’s unlikely a state registry would have done any good.

There is some important context that should be considered. The Flores and Browns were foster families. The state requires lots of oversight for foster kids, including home inspections, which didn’t prevent the circumstances that led to charges being filed. It is also unclear who was homeschooled. State law requires foster kids to attend an accredited public or private school. Foster children cannot, by law, be homeschooled or even attend an online school. Perhaps the families were homeschooling students they were adopting, but if the foster care regulations didn’t catch the issues, how would a homeschooling registry?

When asked how the registry would have prevented these cases of alleged abuse, the state superintendent did not answer. Neither did the school board president. How would requiring parents to send in a notice or fill out a form saying they are homeschooling have any effect on abuse?

During the last school year, there were 659 violent crimes and 1,396 expulsions in Michigan’s public schools, many of which were severe incidents. In the meantime, more than three-quarters of students in Michigan’s largest public school system, in Detroit, are chronically absent. And fewer than 30% of students statewide score proficient or above on the national test, meaning the public education system the state oversees isn’t doing well.

If lawmakers and bureaucrats want to improve student safety, educational achievement and reduce truancy, there is a lot of work to do with the kids who are already registered with the state — and attending the public school system. Instead, state officials seem intent on ducking these difficult issues and avoiding accountability for the system they are in charge of. Instead, they talk of going after homeschool families, the vast majority of whom are doing a much better job at providing a positive learning environment than the one government does.

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