

Vermont Home Education Network

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Senate Education Committee, March 28, 2023 Testimony by Retta Dunlap

I am a retired homeschooling mom who homeschooled four children K-12 and has worked for the past 25 years as a statewide advocate for homeschooling here in the State House, with the Agency of Education, and with homeschoolers at large. I am not a lawyer but there is one law that I quite familiar with and its legislative intent and that is 166b the home study statute.

Who are homeschoolers:

Vermont homeschooling families come from **all walks of life and points of view** such as: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Wiccan, Atheist, or Democrat, Republican, Progressive, Libertarian or no label at all. They have college degrees or only high school diplomas and even some without a high school diploma. Some are licensed teachers and some have never taught anyone. In 2001, Dr Mitchell Stevens, wrote a book called Kingdom of Children about homeschooling in the Midwest and summed it up this way: **“What distinguishes homeschoolers from other parents is not their basic understanding of childhood or level of education but rather the exceptional extent to which homeschoolers have elaborated that understanding and put it into practice.”** Page 70 **This is what VHEN is built on.** I homeschooled on purpose as I saw it as a natural progression of raising my own children. Many who are choosing to homeschool today, are not all choosing to do so as a first choice, like I did. They have reasons why an intuitional setting is not working for their child and they will also go to extraordinary lengths to accomplish what their child needs in that moment. All in all, over 70,000+ children in Vermont have been educated from home and these families have made tremendous changes and had positive experiences even if they only homeschooled for a year or two. Sometimes that is all that is needed to reset the education of a child as homeschooling is not for everyone. (See attached chart for enrollment number over the years.)

Current Enrollment Process verses proposed process:

The current enrollment process is the submission of a course of study and an annual assessment. If it is not worded just right a parent often has to add a phrase or two to make it complete. This serves no purpose to anyone in this process. From my point of view of 25 years – submission of this paper work does nothing except to stress out parents and over burden Agency staff with the technicalities of it all. The language in this bill is from the AOE and homeschoolers did see something similar in January of 2022 from the AOE which we had input on. What the state must know is who these kids are, where they are, and who is responsible for their education. This new language does exactly that in a straightforward way while still requiring parents to do certain things like keeping it on file at home which is something they already do.

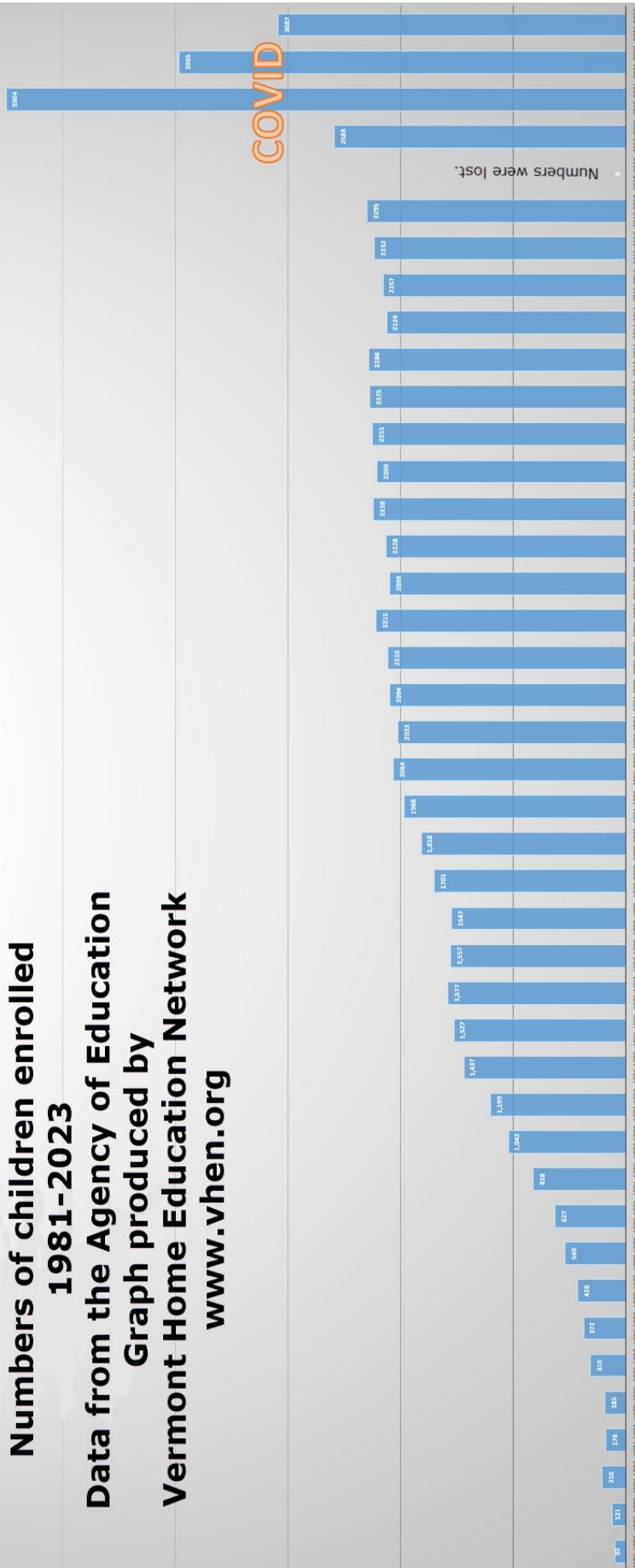
Over the years that I complied with the current home study statute, I created 49 enrollment notices. It did cramp my style as I always knew I had to hand in paper work and so I would constantly be fighting against the “teaching to the test” mentality that crept into my homeschooling program. I always did what was best for my children and went with their learning flow but it did not help that I had to create meaningless paper work every summer. I always had a course of study on file at home. It just did not look like the fabricated one I handed in to the state as my course of study was fluid. Unlike an institutional school I had way more flexibility to adjust what we did on a daily basis to keep the love of learning moving forward and still on track for my children being productive adults.

Minor changes for clarity:

I do not want to alter the substance of what the AOE has presented to you so I have brought these changes to the attention of Sec French and Counsel Emily Simmons. They are in the process of working through them and that 1-3 is ok with them and said we are not far apart on the other 3.

1. **Page 4 line 20.** The new language talks about two different types of notices that parents are to submit. One is an **'enrollment notice' or 'notice of intent to enroll'** found in section (a) and then there is the **annual notice** found in section (k). Unfortunately, the word annual is found in section (a) as well as section (k) so the word 'annual' needs to be removed in section (a) for clarity. The intent is to submit a complete enrollment notice once, it is like an affidavit, and then to confirm each year to the Sec of Ed, by an annual notice, that the family will continue homeschooling under the enrollment notice found in section (a).
2. **Page 5 line 15-16.** Many homeschoolers are concerned about how the standardized testing option is worded as it needs to be clearer as to who can administer it. I suggest we borrow a phrase from the current statute to add to the current language of the bill at the end of line 16: **"or administered in a manner approved by the testing company"**.
3. **Page 5 line 20.** Does the agency mean the parent portfolio should **ONLY** have **4 samples** or it should have **4 samples per the subject area** mentioned in section (5) (A) and (B)?
4. **Page 6 line 15-17.** The bill says **"each child will be provided the equivalent of at least 175 days of instruction in the minimum course of study"**. The words **"per year"** should be added after the word **study**, so that it is clear it is per year and NOT per 'school year' as that has a different meaning that correlates to what the public schools do.
5. **Page 13 line 3.** About the annual notice. I do not know if this is necessary but some homeschoolers have brought it up nor do I know how to word this. The phrase **"on or before the start of each following year"** means what? Homeschooling does not always follow the public-school year from September to June. Some homeschoolers go year-round with different vacation schedules. Some start their school year in January, others in June. So, what does **"each following year"** mean? Does that year start 12 months after the enrollment notice was submitted? Or is this annual notice due in the fall of each public-school year? Could this be clarified somewhat? Or is this to be determined by the agency after passage?
6. **Page 14 line 20.** Lastly, will this law become fully applied on July 1st? In other words, last year families enrolled under the old 166b and **after July 1st** families that enroll will not have to submit an end of year assessment to "complete the AOE's filing system"? I would prefer the new law become effective upon the Governor's signature in that they do not have to hand in a course of study OR an assessment for enrollment in 2023 forward. Is the wording sufficient to cover a complete turn over in the law this year?

**Numbers of children enrolled
1981-2023**
Data from the Agency of Education
Graph produced by
Vermont Home Education Network
www.vhen.org



2018-2019 – numbers were lost
2022-2023 – #s as of 10/24/22, likely a bit higher today

Year	Children
1981-1982	92
1982-1983	121
1983-1984	210
1984-1985	176
1985-1986	185
1986-1987	310
1987-1988	372
1988-1989	428
1989-1990	540
1990-1991	627
1991-1992	818
1992-1993	1,042
1993-1994	1,199
1994-1995	1,437
1995-1996	1,527
1996-1997	1,577
1997-1998	1,557
1998-1999	1,547
1999-2000	1,701
2000-2001	1,818
2001-2002	1,968
2002-2003	2,064
2003-2004	2,023
2004-2005	2,094
2005-2006	2,110
2006-2007	2,215
2007-2008	2,128
2008-2009	2,238
2009-2010	2,209
2010-2011	2,251
2011-2012	2,275
2012-2013	2,286
2013-2014	2,124
2014-2015	2,157
2015-2016	2,232
2016-2017	2,295
2017-2018	2,288
2018-2019	*
2019-2020	2,588
2020-2021	5,504
2021-2022	3,965
2022-2023	3,087