“Numbers Don’t Lie”: A response to

the Office of the Child Advocate’s

report on homeschooling

*A message from Peter Kamakawiwoole*

Dear HSLDA Members and Friends,

Yesterday morning, the Office of the Child Advocate (OCA) published a

28-page supplemental report on homeschooling in Connecticut. The

report claims that from 2013 through 2016, 139 out of 380 students who

were withdrawn from public school to be homeschooled also lived in

families that were the subject of at least one accepted report for suspected

abuse or neglect. The data is drawn from six of Connecticut’s 206 public

school districts, five of which are unidentified.

Based on this data, the OCA concluded that “the absence of any specific

state law or regulation regarding the withdrawal of students to be

homeschooled has allowed certain children, some of whom may be

documented victims of abuse or neglect or prior alleged victims of abuse

or neglect, to be withdrawn from school without any plan for follow up or

assurances that the child will receive any education at all.”

The problem with this argument is that the OCA’s report overstates its

findings and their significance. The report does not show, as the Hartford

Courant’s editorial board suggested this morning, that “far too many

[homeschooling] parents aren’t providing safe environments for quality

education to happen.”

**“Accepted” is not “Substantiated”**

The OCA claims that in six school districts over a three-year period, 139

out of 380 homeschooled students (roughly one-third) “lived in families

that had been the subject of a previous accepted report to DCF.” This, of

course, begs the question: what is an “accepted report”?

The report explains in a footnote that “accepted” reports are reports

which, if true, would rise to the level of abuse or neglect. Thus, an

allegation that a child is being starved or a newborn is left alone at home

would be “accepted” because both allegations, if true, would constitute

abuse or neglect. Conversely, an allegation that a parent paints a child’s

toenails purple or failed to file a notice of intent would not be “accepted,”

because neither act constitutes abuse or neglect under Connecticut law.

“Accepted” reports can then be investigated by the Department of

Children and Families (DCF).

How many reports each year are “accepted”? The OCA’s report doesn’t

say, but according to state data compiled by the U.S. Department of

Health and Human Services, Connecticut received more than 40,000

reports of child abuse and neglect in 2016. Of these, 55 percent—or more

than 22,000 “reports”—were screened out (not-accepted) because they

failed to even allege abusive or neglectful conduct. And “accepted” reports

can come from a number of sources, ranging from mandatory reporters

(which includes all school officials in Connecticut) to anonymous, false,

and even malicious reports from people with a personal axe to grind.

The OCA report also fails to clarify that there is a fundamental difference

between “*accepted*” reports (the allegation might be abuse or neglect, if

true) and “*substantiated*” reports (there is actual evidence to either

suspect or conclude that the allegation is true). Yet outside of the six “case

examples,” the phrase “substantiation” appears only once in the OCA’s

report: at the top of page 7, which states that “17 children [of the 139

children examined in the report] lived in families with 1 prior accepted

report to DCF and where there was no substantiation for abuse/neglect.”

Every other reference to “reports” are to “accepted” reports, not

“substantiated” reports. The OCA never specifies how many of these

reports ultimately proved genuine, and how many were groundless.

Without this clarification, the OCA’s data does nothing to quantify the

actual danger posed to homeschooled children. On the contrary, the data

shows that the vast majority of “accepted” reports turn out to be

“unsubstantiated.” According to the U.S. Department of Health, nearly

27,000 Connecticut children were investigated in 2016; more than 18,000

(68%) proved *unsubstantiated*.

The Courant’s editorial board opines that “far too many parents aren’t

providing safe environments for quality education to happen.” But the

only definitive finding of unsafe home environments in the OCA’s report

is the isolated example in “Case Example (3),” which also happens to be

the only case study in the report where allegations against the family were

found to be substantiated. One isolated example does not establish a

trend.

The OCA’s report also doesn’t quantify the percentage of “accepted”

reports for abuse as opposed to the percentage of “accepted” reports for

neglect, or even what forms of “abuse” or “neglect” were alleged. Again,

the Department of Health’s data sheds light on the topic. In 2016, 84.9%

of substantiated reports in Connecticut involved some form of neglect.

The percentage involving physical or sexual abuse were far smaller: just

6.7% and 4.7%, respectively. There is no data on the number of children

found to be in “unsafe homes,” whether homeschooled or otherwise.

**Spotlighting “homeschooling” is unlikely to prevent**

**abuse or neglect**

Matthew Tirado’s death was a terrible tragedy, and the December 2017

OCA report brought many details about that tragedy to light. We know

that Matthew was the subject of multiple child welfare investigations both

before and after he was withdrawn from school, some of which ended up

before the juvenile court. School officials before, during, and after

Matthew’s death were and remain mandatory reporters, charged by law to

report suspicions of abuse and neglect to DHS. DHS was and remains

charged with investigating those reports. And the juvenile court was and

remains charged with ensuring that petitions brought before it are

properly resolved.

Given these facts, OCA’s initial report approached Matthew’s death

comprehensively. It referenced “homeschooling” only seven times, and

less than six pages (out of 80) were spent on how the education system as

a whole failed to identify Matthew Tirado as a child abuse victim. The new

report’s subsequent emphasis on homeschooling is therefore surprising,

given that the data fails to establish any connection between a child’s

education setting in general—or homeschooling in particular—and the

risk of a child to suffer abuse or neglect.

In 2016, the Commission to Eliminate Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities

(CECANF) published a comprehensive, 168-page report. The Commission

did not identify “homeschooling” as a risk factor for abuse or neglect. Nor

have studies conducted by the World Health Organization, the Mayo

Clinic, the American Psychological Association, or the U.S. Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention. Instead, the Commission found that 75%

of all child fatalities involved children 3 years of age or younger, too young

to be affected by any education law reforms.

HSLDA is extremely disappointed that the OCA’s report failed to

appreciate—or advise its readers—about the difference between

“accepted” and “substantiated” reports. As a result, numerous stories on

the report contain assertions about homeschooling families that are both

false and inflammatory. We fully endorse the calls by other homeschool

leaders in Connecticut for the OCA to disclose the information relied upon

in the report, so that the record can be set straight.

Finally, despite the errors in the OCA’s report, we anticipate that it will

continue to gain local and national attention in the upcoming weeks. We

are currently working with homeschool leaders on the best strategy

moving forward. In the interim, you can sign up for HSLDA’s free email

alert service to get the latest information about the OCA’s report, and

don’t forget to make sure your contact information is current with your

state organization (if you’ve never joined, now is a great time to do so).

Let’s remain bold and vigilant for the truth, and for homeschool freedom