

From: Manfred Smith, Founder and President
Maryland Home Education Association
To: Chair Vanessa E. Atterbeary
Members of the Ways & Means Committee
Re: Opposition to HOUSE BILL 832
Date: March 1, 2022

Chair Vanessa E. Atterbeary and Members of the Ways & Means Committee:

My name is Manfred Smith. I'm a retired Maryland public-school teacher and the founder and President of the Maryland Home Education Association (MHEA) est. in 1980. I'm the Principal Director of The Learning Community International (TLCI), an accredited Maryland private school registered with the Maryland State Department of Education since 1984 and authorized to supervise home instruction. And last but not least, the proud father of three homeschooled high school graduates.

January 1986 was the last time I addressed this committee when MHEA, a secular organization, allied with the Family Protection Lobby to create HB1443, a pro-homeschooling bill. This bill was designed to address the severe cases of abuse by Maryland school personnel of homeschooling parents.

Beginning in 1980, parents choosing to homeschool faced hostility, fines, the threat of having their children taken away, and some even went to jail. Despite the oppressive tactics deterring parents from choosing this educational alternative, homeschooling in Maryland quadrupled within two years.

In the 1984 court case, Miller vs. Anne Arundel County, MHEA proved that the Miller family complied with 7-301 of the Maryland Code by providing "regular, thorough education" to their homeschooled children. Unfortunately, our success did not stop school officials' continued harassment and threats of homeschoolers and MHEA agreed to take our case to the legislature.

Our homeschooling legislation failed to pass the Senate committee because the Maryland State Department of Education lobbied against the bill. After all, as a law it would have diminished MSDE authority over home educators. MSDE guaranteed legislators to work with homeschoolers to create a rational set of homeschool regulations.

MHEA lawyer Ray Fidler, a Maryland homeschool parent, and I met with the State Superintendent of Education to discuss new regulations. Our efforts came to successful fruition with the State Board of Education passing MD COMAR 13A.10.05, the homeschooling regulations which went into effect on July 1, 1987. With minimal changes since then, these regulations have secured the right of any parent or guardian to educate their children.

The point of my brief history presentation is simply to show that homeschooling in Maryland did not come about because the legislature created a special council to communicate effectively with state authorities but from the efforts and resistance of dedicated, resourceful parents.

- It was not educational experts who stood up to extoll the benefits of homeschooling one's child. On the contrary, academic experts called us irresponsible yahoos.
- It was not a benign State Board of Education asking homeschoolers to communicate their needs. Instead, the Board created a bylaw that restricted homeschooling to certified teachers and gave school authorities a green light to threaten and undermined homeschoolers.
- It was not an enlightened legislature that fought for the right to homeschool. Instead, legislators piled on restrictive amendments to the homeschool bill 1443.

In 1979 while in my ninth year as a public schoolteacher, I launched the effort to secure a parent's right to educate their own children and provided support to dedicated parents who proceeded to do so against the opposition of experts and local and state authorities.

MHEA organized state conferences. Homeschooling parents dedicated to their children met in local parks and sprang into action. They established and circulated newsletters, organized meetings in their regional and nearby counties to discuss their needs and goals, shared their professional expertise in support of each other, and exchanged resources. Homeschoolers reached out to bowling, aquatic centers, and martial arts schools for classes. These business owners welcomed homeschooling families to fill their otherwise empty mid-day businesses.

They established organizations (many of them remain active today) and learning cooperatives, field trips groups, parent support groups for children with learning challenges, teen groups, literature and activity groups, and much more. And, when the internet appeared, they quickly made the transition and went online. I can go on and on.

For the first two decades, the public library was the primary information and educational resource for homeschoolers. Today, homeschoolers have access to an entire world of support, news, and resources—many of them free—at their fingertips. There are dozens of online schools that provide excellent educational opportunities for homeschooled learners' diverse needs and interests. In Maryland, there are dozens of homeschool umbrellas and organizations that support the vast diversity of our homeschool community. Many retired homeschool pioneers make themselves available to the growing community of young parents. These young homeschooling families are grateful to those who came before them and reach out for inspiration and guidance based on their years of experience.

As the success of homeschooling learners appeared in social and academic journals, the hostility and abuse began to wane, and a more amicable relationship between homeschoolers and school authorities developed.

Why now, after 30+ years, is there a sudden need for a formal council to represent and communicate homeschooler "needs"?

Any information about scholarships, special education services, and other needs is easily accessed by contacting the homeschool coordinator at one's local school system, asking the director of one's umbrella organization, or contacting a homeschool organization.

Homeschoolers are not seeking a closer relationship with MSDE or any state authority. After all, homeschoolers left the schools because they did not meet their children needs. Homeschoolers by nature are independent and resourceful and most of all wish to remain free to educate their children in ways that best meet their needs. A government authorized council is unnecessary and will easily become a vehicle for future overreach and control by school authorities or even an uninformed, well intentioned homeschooler.

If the legislature wishes to be helpful, I strongly suggest that this committee support Superintendent Gary Cox's revision of HB 832 and have the MSDE create an extensive portal of resources, contacts, and information that any parent and student can easily access.

Thank you.