

Homeschooling and “Educational Reform”

Karen Braun

Homeschooling has changed tremendously in the last twenty years. In the early 1980s, few parents considered homeschooling their children. The legal and logistical obstacles discouraged most from considering homeschooling as a viable option. Some parents even went to jail or fought in the courts for years because they believed that it was the right of parents to direct the education of their children. The situation is far different for most homeschoolers today. It seems unlikely that homeschooling will ever be illegal in the United States again. In most states, there seems to be a truce on the legislative front, allowing homeschooling to remain legal, albeit with varying levels of restriction.

However, opposition to homeschooling—and, for that matter, to Christian education in general—continues. While homeschooling may not be made illegal by legislation, certain “educational reforms” can make homeschooling less desirable for parents and their children. Educational reform today is increasingly focused on “core curriculum”, which, unfortunately, is not defined as strictly academic knowledge and skills. And it is educational professionals, politicians, and testing companies, rather than parents, who define what this “core curriculum” includes, both in content and emphasis.

The “crunch” comes when homeschoolers seek to enter college or even gain employment. Even today, some colleges are beginning to reject high school courses taught from a Christian perspective. In addition, standardized testing is being shaped in ways that may put students at a disadvantage for college entrance or even employment if their education has not focused on the state-defined core standards or curriculum content.

College Enrollment

Consider the lawsuit filed in Los Angeles Federal Court in August by the Association of Christian Schools International, Calvary Chapel Christian School in Murrieta, California, and several students enrolled at the school. The civil rights lawsuit alleges viewpoint and content discrimination by the University of California (UC) system against high schools that teach creation and other conservative Christian viewpoints. The Christian schools primarily use Bob Jones and A Beka textbooks. The plaintiffs argue that barring students from admission violates the right to free speech and the right to religious freedom of the Christian schools and students.

The Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools (BOARS), a committee of the UC Faculty Senate, sets the guidelines for admissions to the University of California system. They have rejected certain textbooks after they determined that the textbooks are primarily religious and academics are secondary.

Burt Carney, Director of Legal/Legislative Issues at ACSI, states that this is not just

about science textbooks (creation vs. evolution) but about all texts that have a strong Christian emphasis. The board has also rejected the history textbooks *American Classics for Christians, Volume V*, by A Beka, and *United States History for Christian Schools*, published by Bob Jones University, for similar reasons. Currently, six textbooks have been rejected; and as more are re-evaluated, that number will increase in the coming years.

According to the ACSI *Legal/Legislative Update* article “Should Some Students Be Denied College Entrance Because They Used These Textbooks?” (16:1, Fall 2005, www.cccsmurrieta.com/elementary/pdfs/lawsuitoverview.pdf), “ACSI believes it’s wrong for the state to discriminate against Christians—essentially foreclosing opportunities at state universities—because of unfair religious prejudice by UC personnel, particularly when UC can’t cite any objective evidence that graduates from Christian schools using these textbooks perform any less well in their freshman year of university than graduates from secular schools.”

Many homeschoolers use Bob Jones and A Beka curriculum. If this policy stands, acceptance to the University of California—and likely, in the future, many other colleges and universities—will not be based simply on academic excellence but on academic content with a bias against the Christian worldview. Furthermore, if they won’t accept the credentials of a private school teaching conservative Christian values, how much less likely are they to accept a homeschooled student who has used the same or similar materials?

At issue is the core of every student’s education. Denying university acceptance discourages parents and private educators from teaching their students a thoroughly biblical worldview and makes private or home education less desirable.

State-Mandated Testing

State- or federally mandated standardized testing could also have a negative impact on homeschoolers. Through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Public Law No. 107-110, www.whitehouse.gov/news/reports/no-child-left-behind.html#1), every child in the United States enrolled in public school is required to be tested for adequate yearly progress in core subjects. The core standards were developed by the federal government for accountability in public schools and to ensure that children are ready to compete in the global economy in the twenty-first century. HSLDA has worked with Congress to ensure that homeschooled children are exempt from this requirement. As the HSLDA quotes from the No Child Left Behind Act on its website, “Nothing in this chapter shall be construed to affect a home school, whether or not a home school is treated as a home school or a private school under State law, nor shall any student schooled at home be required to participate in any assessment referenced in this act. (20 USCA §7886(b), www.hslda.org/courtreport/v19n2/v19n209.asp)

It is tempting to breathe a sigh of relief and say, “We’re safe.” But that would be a false sense of security.

Many states are now using the exam to help determine college entry, award scholarships, and influence employment consideration. Current reforms in Michigan illustrate this trend. In the early 1990s, Michigan developed the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) test to set a standard for academic excellence in the state. The exam was said to be a “report card” of each school’s performance and student achievement. The Michigan Merit Award was established in 1999 as an incentive to take the test. The award provides \$2,500 for outstanding performance on the exam. Clearly, the state wanted students to participate in the exam. The offer included homeschooled students.

In December of last year, the state legislature replaced the MEAP with the ACT (formerly American College Testing Service) and made the ACT a requirement for graduation beginning in 2007. (Illinois and Colorado have done so as well.) They also revised the exam. Along with testing core academic subjects, the test contains a “job readiness” portion that will help to determine work-related skills and career preparation. The ultimate goal is state-defined career tracking.

Michigan State Senator Michael Switalski defends the adoption of the ACT on his website (www.senate.mi.gov/newsarchives/10-042004.htm):

Currently, the MEAP is used by the state as the measurement to meet the annual yearly progress standard established under the No Child Left Behind Act passed by Congress. The ACT legislation would replace the MEAP with the Michigan Merit Exam, a combination of the ACT and Work Keys work readiness skills test. These tests are currently used by colleges and employers to demonstrate proficiency.

Replacing the MEAP with the ACT test would allow results to be obtained more quickly and would save parents the cost of paying for the ACT out of their own pockets.

The MEAP has no bearing on whether a student gets accepted to a college or not. I think the switch would encourage students to take these tests more seriously, ultimately increasing enrollment in Michigan’s colleges and universities.

Because it is now the ACT and mandatory, the students’ state exam will help determine whether they are accepted into a university or directed to another educational opportunity. Those who do not take the test may be considered less desirable. Homeschool parents who do want their children to take the test will need to teach what is on the test, thereby making the test designers their curriculum designers to some degree.

The Michigan Work Keys website (www.michigan.gov/mdcd/1,1607,7-122-1683_2988_2991-12756--,00.html) further explains its purpose [emphasis

added]:

Work Keys has become an integral part of Michigan's career development system. Using Work Keys ...

- **Employers** can assess workers and customize training for a wide range of skilled jobs,
- **Students** and workers can document and advance their employability skills, and
- **Educators** can tailor instructional programs to help students acquire the skills employers need.

If Michigan reforms achieve their goal, students' performance on the test will influence their employment opportunities, making the need to teach the test's content and emphases even more urgent for parents and students.

Furthermore, the vision of the ACT, according to their website, is "To be the world's leading provider of information for educational and career decisions in support of lifelong learning" (www.act.org/aboutact/). The exam is no longer an independent test for college entry. ACT is now working with multiple state governments to test core academic standards and career development. If more and more states adopt the ACT as their state exam, we will effectively move toward a national exam controlled by the government and industry, facilitated by the ACT.

Currently, homeschoolers are not required to take the exam, but that doesn't mean they will escape the consequences of a national exam or a national curriculum. As the federal government mandates certain standards, colleges and employers will likely begin to use the federal guidelines as the de facto standard as well. The designations or endorsements given (often referred to as Certificate of Initial Mastery, or CIM) will be part of the criteria used to judge a potential student or employee. A university would be less likely to consider a student without the proper designation or endorsement. Or an employer would give more credibility to a job applicant who has a CIM.

Oregon is another state in which the Department of Education is working to implement similar measures. See the sidebar at right for more information.

Homeschoolers would have to take a state or national exam or else possibly forfeit consideration for placement in college or a specific career. Testing becomes the driving force behind curriculum choices. It is doubtful that the Christian worldview will be considered a "core standard." In order to do well on certain portions of the exam, a child will have to be taught what the state believes is important. But the reason many parents have chosen to homeschool in the first place is precisely because they disagree with the state about what is important. The ultimate result is a loss of liberty by the parent and

some state control of curriculum choices.

It will be unfortunate if homeschooling parents lose gains of previous decades through the movement for “educational reform.” Homeschooling parents are educating their own children for the very reason that they desire to shape the education their children receive. It would be sad to see all the previous gains in homeschooling lost because we were willing to give up our liberties for college acceptance or career placement.

Do Something About It

Here are some websites to help you learn more and some ways you can take action.

EdAction—Very informative website on the history of education reform in the United States. Click on “newcomers info” on the sidebar to get started. www.edaction.org

Fair Test—This website has a state-by-state listing of colleges that don’t necessarily require SAT or ACT scores for incoming students. www.fairtest.org

Homeschool Legal Defense Association—Do a keyword search on national testing or No Child Left Behind. www.hslda.org

Association of Christian Schools International—(To follow the court case mentioned in the article.) www.acsi.org/~case

EdWatch—Education for a Free Nation www.edwatch.org/index.html

Karen Braun—www.homeschoolblogger.com/spunkyhomeschool

The book *Real Choice, Real Freedom* by Kerry Morgan is an excellent resource for understanding the rights of parents as ordained by God and the US Constitution.

Get to know your elected officials at all levels of government. They are more accessible than you might think. Find out who their legislative aide is that handles education issues. Then begin to educate them on what you learn. Talk to the education committee chairperson in your state about this issue. Get on their mailing list to stay current about your state.

Inform others. Let others know what you have learned. Take a few minutes at your support group meeting to educate others.

Decide how your family will handle these issues before you are confronted with important decisions about testing requirements and college entry.

Pray. “*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.*”

Biographical Information

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Karen Braun is engaged in the full-time art of managing her home and home schooling the Braun children. She is known in the homeschooling community as "Spunky" from her popular blog, [SpunkyHomeschool](#). Karen has been a guest speaker on behalf of home schooling issues on local and national radio programs, spoken at local and regional homeschool events, and defended Christian family values on Detroit television news program. She served as the original blogging editor for [HomeschoolBlogger.com](#) and The Old Schoolhouse® Magazine where she is still a contributing writer. Karen holds a BS in computer science from the University of Michigan.