

K12 (Again!) and others who covet homeschoolers and why

March 26, 2003

Summary: Ohio homeschoolers were again bombarded with unsolicited mailings last week from K12. A lavishly-produced public relations mailing announces a clearly expensive April 5 "K12 Innovation in Education" Expo to take place in Columbus, OH. These efforts on the part of this for-profit education management company continue to blur the distinct differences between homeschooling and publicly-funded, government-controlled schooling via an e-school or cyber-school. Homeschoolers should be aware of the dangerous trends toward homeschooling being integrated into government school in their homes. Unless we work to preserve our independence, we may find that our rights are quickly eroded.

Statements from the K12 Expo mailing

"The Speakers" include William J. Bennett, with a typical bio and the statement: "Hear his valuable insights on the current state of education and his visions for the future of education in the United States." (The impression is made that Bennett will be at the expo. However, an announcement on an OHVA-K12 discussion board—home of his Ohio charter school—tells us that Bennett will only be there virtually, by video satellite.)

Despite Bennett's repeated denials that K12 is trying to confuse homeschooling and his publicly-funded, government accountable, cyber-school, the workshop descriptions include statements that clearly continue to contribute to confusion.

Linking homeschooling: We are told that attendees will be able to "Meet other Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA) families, staff, interested parents, and K12 homeschooling families...." This appears in the brochure's first sentence, so linkage is immediately made between this government-controlled program and homeschooling.

Workshop descriptions include:

- **Time Management:** The life of a home educator can feel like a nonstop roller-coaster ride.... This workshop will give you valuable tips to help you manage

your time so that you never need to feel hurried or frantic.

- **Setting Up Your Teaching Environment:** You've decided to teach your child at home.... Learn from education experts how to set up an effective teaching environment.
- **Teaching Multiple Children:** Many parents fear that teaching more than one child at home will be too time-intensive and arduous.

Notice the diminishing language of these three workshop descriptions, discrediting the valuable, long-term successes of homeschooling, equating this decision with extreme effort and hardship, and introducing words such as "fear," "frantic, and outside "expert." These descriptions undermine and disrespect the successes of the innumerable homeschooling families who thrived, long before Bennett and his colleagues began harvesting tax dollars for charter schools. In fact, OHEC believes homeschooling success is the very reason that we have been placed in the crosshairs of those seeking to profit from charter schools.

Enticements to participate: Prizes for children are promised as well as a registration raffle for a "...brand-new laptop computer. Any children you include on your registration form are entered in another drawing for

a LeapFrog goodie bag." Since K12 is receiving funding from many states' education budgets, OHEC questions the use of taxpayer money for extravagant enticements to participate in the conferences of for-profit companies. We also question the program quality if such enticements are necessary to solicit registration.

Conspicuously absent in the brochure

Not surprisingly, the Expo brochure doesn't even attempt to address the differences between homeschooling and enrollment in government-controlled charter schools. K12's abundant mailings of last year to Ohio homeschoolers did not address these distinctions either. We feel homeschoolers should know exactly what rights and freedoms they must relinquish if they choose to enroll in a government-funded e-school. The Wisconsin Parents Association recently wrote:

"The biggest difference between homeschools and public e-schools is that homeschoolers take direct responsibility by choosing a curriculum, an approach to learning, and the principles and values on which these are based while public e-school parents accept and follow detailed instructions about what to learn and how to learn it, using a curriculum designed to comply with state requirements and values. Instead of being able to choose an approach to learning and curriculum that works for their family (as homeschooling families...do), public e-schools are state schools, which means the state is coming into their homes. People who enroll in them must:

- *Keep extensive records and report on the hours of study each day for each child.*
- *Comply with state standards in education.*
- *Take state-mandated tests which determine their curriculum since students have to study what will be on the tests.*
- *Complete a year's worth of specific as-*

signments delivered by computer by the company running the public e-school.

- *Work individually with each child, since subject matter is different for each grade. In other words, siblings can't work on the same topic at the same time at different levels, as many homeschoolers do."*

– Source: Wisconsin Parents Association Newsletter, Issue 75, and March 2003

“Blending” homeschooling with public schools

Whether it is affiliation with charter schools or with traditional public schools, OHEC believes that enticements to participate in government schools, if successful, will eventually result in the loss of autonomy homeschoolers have enjoyed in Ohio since 1989. We also strongly believe that many homeschooling families will see the danger of these enticements and will not accept them as they know the “freebies” come with too steep a price—the loss of their children's and their family's freedoms to home educate and live lives absent government regulation..

OHEC recently learned of and reported on related initiatives to “blend” programs in Florida between the Okaloosa County School District and homeschooling. As the Floridians point out, they are creating a “new approach” with their Blended School Program, by taking “the lead and develop[ing] a model for Florida and the nation.” We remind the reader of the definition of “blended”: ***to mix smoothly and inseparably together; to have no perceptible separation.***

Just a few years ago, the traditional school community was seldom considered to be “welcoming” of homeschoolers—in fact, quite the contrary. Hundreds of articles and essays were written to demonstrate the numerous challenges homeschoolers faced in dealing with school administrations and just to force those administrations to comply

with existing state laws. To be sure, those challenges still occur.

But as school choice advocates—both those inside and those outside state legislatures—started stepping into the picture, and as initiatives such as charter schools were created, “programs” were developed to include homeschoolers. Either because they were legislatively “forced” to allow homeschoolers, or because they determined that homeschoolers were a significant source of revenue and could help stem the losses to enrollment, campaigns were created to specifically enroll homeschoolers.

In their Blended School Program proposal, Okaloosa County schools cited trends in programs that had been created on the west coast, as well as citing Bennett’s K12. Researching the west coast area, OHEC finds the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory’s January, 2000, “hot topic” booklet entitled *Making Positive Connections With Homeschoolers*. Funded by the US Department of Education, NWREL tells us on page 6 of the “incentives” to “cooperate with homeschoolers” which include: legislative mandate, enrollment and funding increases, and preparing for potential re-enrollment of students. According to the report, additional benefits of reaching out to homeschoolers include: *A reassurance to concerned educators that homeschooled students’ needs are truly being met and that they are making adequate educational progress (Dahm, 1996).*

We can’t beat you, so join us?

OHEC finds it ironic that for many years, homeschoolers have worked hard to prevent any one organization from “speaking for all homeschoolers” even if those organizations were created by and for homeschoolers. Now, we have US Department of Education-funded organizations and local school districts “speaking for” homeschoolers, creating their own versions of definitions to key

homeschooling questions. These from the Florida proposal:

- What is homeschooling?
- Who is homeschooling?
- Why homeschool?
- What homeschoolers think

More serious than ironic, we see the real intentions as discussed in many news reports announcing these coming “homogenized” versions of government school and homeschooling hybrids (see below). OHEC understands the challenges that local school districts now face. Because of drastic changes in education policy, including the creation of voucher schools and hundreds of charter schools, coupled with deep cuts in education funding in virtually all 50 states, local school districts are scrambling to stop the financial bleeding.

The funding crisis for public education is so significant, it is astonishing the direction that at least four Ohio school districts are now undertaking. They have announced their intentions to convert their entire school districts to charter schools. In some cases, if they are successful, they stand to increase their state funding by four-fold.

The shortfalls, however, in school budgets cannot and should not be made up on the backs of the homeschooling community.

Clearly, stemming of financial losses must be the motivation of school districts here in Ohio. As of this writing, six school districts are now receiving funding from the state for their version of cyber charter school, including an umbrella operation known as TRECA, which is a consortium of school districts. It is astounding to us that, according to the Ohio Department of Education Charter School Directory, beyond those six, there are another 50 school-district cyber (digital) charter schools waiting in the wings, already approved. (See:

http://webapp1.ode.state.oh.us/community_schools/school_directory/)

As of the March 2003 payments, the state projects total current year funding to all cyber charters, both those sponsored by school districts and the four for-profit schools, will exceed \$42.25 million dollars or 21% of all charter school funding. The current school enrollment for all cyber charters is 7,563 or 22% of all charter schools in the state.

Precision target marketing to homeschoolers is inevitable from those school districts undertaking such schools. After all, it is the school districts themselves that maintain the list of homeschoolers as they notify.

News reports are revealing

OHEC believes that all families have the right to educate their children according to their principles and beliefs. But families need to think deeply and critically of the requirements of enrollment, both for their own families and for others who would like to homeschool after them.

Enrollment has always been available to families. Some have done so and understood that they were returning to government school when they did. Preserving the freedom to homeschool without any government interference is and has been the primary goal of thousands of families. Given the intentions of those who are creating these programs, we believe that enrollment and homeschooling are and must remain mutually exclusive to insure the continued opportunity to homeschool for all.

The following news excerpts from the last year show a pattern change in attitudes by school districts across the country toward initiatives to establish 'homeschooling programs.' With few exceptions, the reports point out what clearly is a primary motivation: state funding and/or control of homeschooling. Several of the excerpts show that charter schools have quite similar motivations.

⊗ Perrysburg (OH School District) Digital Academy

'Dr. Edinger raised some concerns about enrollment. Enrollment figures of 25 for the first year and 45 by the fifth year of operation are 'hoped for' numbers, and are not based on any marketing studies, he said.

'We do not know what the need is here,' he said.'

'Dr. Cline said the academy would open opportunities for students in the district, including those who are home-schooled. In addition, as sponsor of the academy, the Perrysburg school board could create a school 'that meets our standards,' he said.'

-- *Toledo Blade, March 1 2003*

⊗ Las Virgenes (CA School District) Homeschool program

'Las Virgenes plans to model its program on those offered by other Ventura County school districts, including Oak Park and Somis.

'Under those programs, a parent serves as the child's primary teacher, but the school district provides textbooks, supplies and lesson plans. At least once a week, the parent and child meet with a district teacher, who checks the child's progress.

'After almost a year of planning, the Las Virgenes board of education decided last month to move ahead with its homeschooling program. Estimated cost for the first year is \$55,000.

'That cost will be offset, though, by state funds the district receives for each student enrolled in its schools -- roughly \$4,400 per child. If 20 students enroll in the homeschooling program, the district would receive up to \$88,000.'

-- *Ventura County Star, February 18, 2003*

⊖ **K12's California Virtual Academy**

“CAVA uses the K-12 curriculum developed by Reagan administration Secretary of Education William Bennett.

“As for accountability, CAVA monitors the progress of roughly 200 students in San Diego via computer and with periodic visits from credentialed teachers. [Children] will also take the same standardized achievement tests as public school students.”

-- *TheSanDiegoChannel.com, February 17, 2003*

⊖ **K12's Wisconsin Virtual Academy/Northern Ozaukee (WI) School District**

“[Northern Ozaukee] School Board member Kate Redmond said she liked the idea of using a virtual school to reach out to families that want homeschooling for their children. ‘It is bringing home schooling under the state’s umbrella,’ Redmond said.”

-- *Ozaukee Press, February 6, 2003*

⊖ **Chambersburg (PA) Area School District on-line school**

“Michael said that the way the system is envisioned, a CASD teacher would act as ‘teacher of record’ for the students taking the courses here. ‘The teacher would score the work, issue grades, and probably make site visits – we’re still working out the details,’ he said.

“Our homeschooling population is our target group,’ he said.”

-- *The Chambersburg Gazette-News, January 22, 2003*

⊖ **Akron (OH Public Schools) Digital Academy**

“The traditional school system with its set hours each school day doesn't work for some kids,’ Akron Superintendent Sylvester Small said. ‘Some kids need to work

or they are home schooled. Our school will allow them to get an education from their home on a schedule they set.’

“The Akron district certainly is interested in educating children, but their motive for opening a charter school was also forced upon them by another reason: money.

“The district’s enrollment last school year fell below 30,000 students for the first time in over a half-century. A school system’s operating budget is determined by the number of pupils it has; the more students the more money. The district has warned of budget shortfalls in the coming years.”

-- *Akron Beacon Journal, August 27, 2002*

⊖ **K12's Ohio Virtual Academy**

“Bennett’s school is targeting home school students with a program geared to helping parents teach their children with e-mail or phone support from teachers employed by the school.”

-- *Dayton Daily News, August 24, 2002*

⊖ **Tri-River Educational Computer Association (OH consortium of on-line schools)**

“Educating children at home is the fastest growing element of charter schools in the state. Enrollment could soar from about 3,000 cyberschool students last year to more than 12,000 in the next few years.

“Carder estimates that while the schools receive more than \$5,000 in state and local money per child, the cost is only \$2,500 per elementary pupil and \$3,500 per high schooler. He said public school districts would use profits to fund other school programs, while for-profit companies would pocket the difference.”

-- *Akron Beacon Journal, July 17, 2002*

⊖ **Mat-Su Borough (AK School District)**

“A third charter school may be coming to the Mat-Su Borough School District, this

one aimed at helping families who want to educate their children at home.

“A group of certified instructors and parents this spring turned in an application to the district to begin Horizon Charter School, a program that would provide guidance to families who are homeschooling their children. The benefits would flow both ways, according to the applicants - the parents would receive professional assistance in better educating their students, and Mat-Su would receive the state dollars for those students, funds that would otherwise go unused or to other districts.”

-- *Matanuska-Susitna Valley Frontiersman*, July 3, 2002

⊖ **North Canton (OH School District) Digital Academy**

“North Canton schools hope to offer online curriculum to students in grades K-8, said Superintendent Thomas Shoup. That could serve home-schooled students and students who are homebound because of illness.

“I think we have the ability to provide a high-quality program,” he said. “At the same time, it will keep our local taxpayers’ money, if people elect to participate, in our school district.”

“Districts lose about \$5,000 in state and local taxes for most students who transfer to community schools. Shoup said North Canton loses about \$22,000 just for three special-needs students who attend one community school.”

-- *The Canton Repository*, June 27, 2002

⊖ **Reynoldsburg (OH School District) Virtual Community School**

“VCS plans to market itself to parents of Ohio’s 120,000 homeschooled children and the state’s 180,000 dropouts age 21 or younger, Mr. Musick said.

“All VCS students in the Reynoldsburg district will be eligible to participate in school

activities, Ross said. For accountability, they will be tested every six weeks in school.”

-- *Columbus Dispatch*, May 18, 2002

⊖ **Lorain (OH School District) Digital Schools**

“The district would in turn save money that might be lost from students who are considering transferring to a charter school, said Superintendent Delores Morgan. ‘It gives us an alternative to students who are home schooled,’ Morgan said. ‘With those students, we get no state reimbursement, and there is no monitoring of the curriculum.’”

-- *Lorain Morning Journal*, April 23, 2002

⊖ **Alternative Education Academy aka OHDELA (OH)**

“The Alternative Education Academy estimates it can enroll 500 students in kindergarten through grade 12 in the first year and 5,000 by the fifth year, drawing at least \$25 million in taxpayer support.

“The school has a contract to immediately pass 97 percent of the tax dollars to White Hat Distance Learning, which provides all of its teachers and management.”

“Home schooling as a part of charter schools has been a controversial issue in other states because it has the potential for high profit for the operators and high expenses for taxpayers.

“California has tried to limit home charter schools because of their rapid growth.”

-- *Akron Beacon Journal*, January 29, 2002

Final Thoughts

OHEC has been monitoring this issue for over three years. We have paid close attention to attitudes and concerns of homeschooling families, support groups, school advocates, charter school profiteers, media and legislators.

As stated above, enrollment in government school has always been available to any family who chose it.

Since we do not live in a perfect world, we must accept trade offs in the numerous decisions that we make each day. Some people love living in the city and choose that willingly. There are benefits to city living, which cannot be found in rural areas. And those in rural areas who love being there are more than happy to trade off the trappings of city life. Most cannot find or afford acreage in the city. And fine art museums are few and far between in the country.

Whatever we “give up” to homeschool, including tax dollars—which all citizens pay, not only homeschoolers, but also those who do not have children in any school—homeschoolers reap the countless benefits of being with our families, growing together, solving problems creatively, supporting other families, traveling together daily through the “real world,” choosing the pace that suits our needs, desires, and goals. Using that model these many years, we believe most homeschoolers have been more than happy to trade off the pre-packaged, state-mandated curriculum, the standardized tests,

“expert” teachers and, yes, even the “free” (loaner) computer.

Certainly, the law allows any family to enroll if they so choose. Those same families can keep a “homeschoolers” attitude about life for the times when they regroup together. But if this becomes your family’s choice, please don’t try to interchange the widely held understanding of enrollment in a school and homeschooling so that your choices do not eliminate the choices for those who want homeschooling freedoms to remain.

There are many things homeschoolers can do in the face of this challenge. We can maintain our rights to homeschool while strengthening homeschooling support groups. We can discuss these important issues and work to inform others. We can work to dispel the developing myth that enrollment is homeschooling. We can make our groups more open, more welcoming and more supportive than ever so that those who truly want to find their way here do not get waylaid for even a moment in operations which work to undermine our community and disempower families.

This information was prepared by Ohio Home Education Coalition, an open and inclusive coalition of interested homeschoolers who come together to raise awareness of issues facing homeschoolers in Ohio. We do not maintain an interactive email address. As we are all busy with our families, individual responses to this fact sheet would be impossible. The authors give permission for this fact sheet to be duplicated in its entirety and distributed to your support group members.