

## EDUCATION

# Michigan students facing educational neglect is a 'hidden problem'



**Lily Altavena**

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No one seems to know how many Michigan children are going without an education.

But a Free Press story about a 12-year-old Michigan girl, Jo, who struggles to read and has rarely stepped foot into a classroom, has some lawmakers and advocates contemplating ways to prevent educational neglect.

Jo's parents did not send their three children to school, and told investigators with Children's Protective Services that they were home-schooling Jo and her two siblings. But family members, friends and court documents contradict the parents' claim.

Michigan law requires little oversight over home-schooled students: Parents don't have to register their children with the state or their local school district, like they do in other states. No state agency will investigate educational neglect claims unless they come with other claims of neglect or abuse.

After hearing Jo's story, Sen. Jeff Irwin, D-Ann Arbor, said he's exploring what legislative reform might look like.

"I know that certainly Michigan could strengthen its laws around educational neglect," Irwin said.

## Defining educational neglect

Educational neglect can come in several forms, according to the Coalition for Responsible Home Education, a nonprofit that advocates for home-schooled children. Possible scenarios include:

If a parent or caregiver fails to enroll their child in school at all, while also failing to educate them through home school. In some cases, parents may not be adequately home-schooling children or home-schooling them at all.

If a parent or caregiver enrolls their child in school, but fails to get them to school, causing at least five absent days a month.

Failure of a parent or school to meet special education needs for a child with a diagnosed disability.

According to the coalition, 24 states include educational neglect in their definition of abuse. Michigan is not among them.

The lack of state oversight means there is no data to suggest how widespread the problem might be in Michigan.

Jillian Ruck, executive director of Child USA, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit think tank dedicated to preventing child abuse and neglect, said it is difficult to know how many kids across the country experience educational neglect.

“We don't really know how many kids are not enrolled and so they kind of aren't even on the radar,” Ruck said. “We think it's hard to measure but we think it's definitely more common than people think.”

Peri Stone-Palmquist, executive director of the Ypsilanti-based Student Advocacy Center of Michigan, said instances of educational neglect aren't always intentional on the part of parents, but rather may signal that parents are struggling financially or in other ways.

“Some of these kids really want to go to school,” she said. “And their parents are really struggling to get that to happen.”

But quantifying the number of children missing out on education is a challenge.

“It's definitely happening. ... It's such a hidden problem,” Stone-Palmquist said.

## **Getting kids to school**

Ruck said she believes reform should happen at the state level.

States like Michigan without educational neglect statutes can't prosecute parents or caregivers for educational neglect, she said. However, it is possible to prosecute parents if their child is truant from school.

"It does come to legal reform in the states of really establishing what is the baseline education that every child needs," she said.

State lawmakers briefly weighed more oversight over home-schooled families in 2015, after a mother in Detroit abused and killed her two children, 13-year-old Stoni Blair and 9-year-old Stephen Berry, stashing their bodies in a deep freezer. Before they died, their mother, Michelle Blair, removed them from a local school to home-school them.

State Sen. Stephanie Chang, D-Detroit, then a state representative, introduced legislation after the children's bodies were discovered.

Her proposal would have required parents and caregivers to register their children as home-schooled with their local school district and have the children meet twice a year with an adult outside the home.

Irwin said he is still researching whether Michigan's problem lies in a lack of oversight of home-schooled students or a lack of enforcement of existing mandatory education laws, which require a child to be educated from ages 6 to 18.

"It's clear that Michigan has essentially no rules for home-schooling," he said. "But we do have rules and we have laws that prohibit neglect of children."

In Jo's case, Children's Protective Services, an agency within the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, knew the 12-year-old and her siblings were not receiving an education for at least a year before petitioning to temporarily remove the children from their parents due to other claims of neglect, according to court documents and transcripts. Jo's case is currently pending in Wayne County.

Bob Wheaton, a spokesperson with MDHHS, wrote in an email that, generally speaking, the agency has no authority over educational neglect if that's the sole allegation, but can investigate if it's paired with other claims of abuse.

In a statement to the Free Press, Attorney General Dana Nessel wrote that adding more oversight over home-school education would be up to state lawmakers.

"A lack of oversight can result in an inadequate education that does not prepare kids for personal success in life. Michigan children deserve better," she wrote.

*Contact Lily Altavena: [laltavena@freepress.com](mailto:laltavena@freepress.com) or follow her on Twitter @LilyAlta.*