

Home-Schooling Parents Bristle At Sandy Hook Policy Recommendations

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3/2/2015

HARTFORD — Home-schooling parents are revolting against recommendations that children with disabilities being taught at home have a special education plan that would need the approval of the local school district.

The proposal was included in a report by a panel of experts charged with crafting public policy in response to the 2012 school shootings at [Sandy Hook Elementary School](#) in Newtown.

To some home-schooling advocates, the proposal from the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission is another example of government overreach, part of a broader effort to undermine parental rights that encompasses issues as disparate as the data-driven tracking of public school children to the case of Justina Pelletier, the West Hartford teenager at the center of a medical dispute between her parents and a Boston hospital.

"If this is passed, it would make Connecticut the worst in the nation when it comes to home-schooling freedom," said Will Estrada, director of federal relations for the Home School Legal Defense Association.

Scott Jackson, chairman of the Sandy Hook panel, said the requirement, if approved, would only apply to home-schooled children who had previously attended a public school. The recommendation is contained in the group's draft report, which will be presented to Gov. Dannel P. Malloy, perhaps by the end of the week.

"If a child leaves a public school with an [individualized education program], that I.E.P. should be monitored until it is no longer necessary," Jackson said. But a disabled child who had never attended a public school would not be subject to the requirement, he said.

Jackson said the commission recognized the proposal would be controversial and spent considerable time discussing it.

"Public policy can frequently be run off the rails by fear and we deliberately wanted to not make this a fearful enterprise," he said. "We talked about it and talked about it and talked about it, but the fear is still out there."



At a press conference at the Capitol last week, home-schooling parents and their allies voiced their alarm.

"These are not the government's children, they're our children," said Deborah Stevenson, a lawyer and a member of the Connecticut Parental Rights Coalition.

[Adam Lanza](#), the gunman who shot his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 children and six adults, received homebound instruction through the Newtown school system when he was in 8th grade. (State law allows children to be taught at home if they are deemed too disabled to receive services in school.)

But Lanza was not home-schooled, which is typically done by a parent. And that's a distinction home-schooling parents emphasized.

"Despite the conclusion of the Office of the Child Advocate that no links could be drawn between the failures in Adam Lanza's education ... his violence, the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission determined that home-schooled students are socially isolated, that isolation leads to violence and that this requires mandatory government oversight," said Donna Person, a home-schooling parent from Stafford and vice president of The Education Association of Christian Home Schoolers of Connecticut.

"This flies in the face of extensive, well-respected, peer-reviewed published research into the social, emotional and mental health of home-educated students," Person said.

Peter Wolfgang, executive director of the Family Institute of Connecticut, which is part of a coalition opposed to the recommendation, said home-schooling parents are being blamed for the tragedy.

Whether or not you agree with new gun control laws "guns at least had something to do with Adam Lanza's grisly crimes," he said.

"Home-schooling had nothing to do with what happened ... for the Sandy Hook commission to use this horrible tragedy as a pretext to increase government control over parental rights ... is an outrage."

Home-schooling parents in Connecticut are not required to have any special qualifications to teach. Person estimated that there are roughly 5,000 to 10,000 home-schooling parents in the state.

Home-schooling advocates are also concerned about a proposal to require all children, including those who are home-schooled, to undergo mandatory mental health screening.

The measure has been raised in the past two legislative sessions, but Sen. Terry Gerratana, co-chairwoman of the legislature's public health committee, said she does not expect it to come up this year.