

Press Conference Recap from 1/12/2004
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About 200-250 homeschoolers came to the State House to voice their opposition to AB4033.

There was no press in the room at the time of the press conference. I heard from friend that they had spoken to a reporter from the Trenton Times who wanted to get in, but was unable to because of the large group of homeschoolers in the room. Apparently it is not unusual, even in Washington, to have people doing a press conference to an empty room. All the press received information packets containing the information spoken about at the press conference.

Carolee Adams introduced us to Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk who introduced a homeschooling bill in 1994 that would have required the testing of all homeschooled children. After hearing from homeschooling parents who educated her on the advantages of homeschooling and showing her their success, she withdrew the bill from consideration. In her words, "if it's not broke, don't fix it." Today, she is a strong supporter of homeschooling.

Timothy Haas, of the New Jersey Homeschool Association, was the first speaker and also acted as a facilitator for the press conference. He spoke about the history of homeschooling in New Jersey. He said, "The current statute (NJSA18A:38-25), dating from the 1920s, has always permitted parents the option to cause their children to 'receive equivalent instruction elsewhere than at school.'"

In 1966, Barbara Massa and her husband removed their daughter from public school and eventually were charged with failing to provide her with equivalent instruction. In 1967, the case came before the Morris County Court. "...Mrs. Massa, acting as her own lawyer, convinced the judge that she had indeed fulfilled her obligations. In his decision, the judge ruled that 'equivalent' meant general academic equivalence only, not equivalence of methods, outcomes or schedules," said Timothy Haas.

It took some time for the effects of the *Massa* ruling to spread. In 1982, the Education Commission informed the school districts that "the local board of education has no responsibility for determining progress of students being instructed at home, and there is likewise no authority to require testing."

Timothy Haas mentioned Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk's introduction and subsequent withdrawal of a homeschooling bill in 1994.

Mr. Haas ended his speech with this statement, "The legal, moral and practical questions about the fitness of homeschooling parents to care for and educate their children were answered in New Jersey decades ago. Sadly, because of issues bearing only the most tangential relationship to homeschooling, it seems as if a new generation of families will have to fight the battle all over again. Honoring the memory of all those who have come before us, we will again prevail."

Mark August, president of Tricounty Home Educators Association spoke next about the standardized testing provision of the bill. His main points were:

Testing requirements have no impact on the success or failure of homeschooling. "There is no difference in academic performance among students in states with high regulation and those with little regulation," he stated.

Mr. August continued, "Assessments tests are tools used by administrators and funding agents to check the effectiveness of the money they are spending." Parents are responsible for the education of their children and many delegate that task to public or private schools. They may ask for an assessment of how well the schools are doing that job. Taxpayers, likewise, may ask for an assessment to justify how their money has been spent. But

homeschoolers use their own money and thus are their own judge as to whether their money was well spent or not.

Testing homeschoolers on the public school curriculum would be unfair. Homeschoolers do not use the public school curriculum, but a plethora of methods and materials to teach their children.

Finally, there is a "long-standing debate in public education on the value of standardized testing in that environment." Because research has shown that student achievement is influenced by many factors (home life, income, etc.), using them to evaluate public school teachers is not recommended by Harcourt Brace, writers of the Stanford Achievement test. If this won't work in public schools that all use the same scope and sequence and have very strict standards for their teachers, how can it be any value to homeschoolers.

Mr. August concluded by stating "the specific requirements for mandatory standardized assessments are unnecessary and wasteful of personal and taxpayer money."

Next was Diane Toler representing Catholic Homeschoolers of New Jersey. She spoke about DYFS and the Jackson case. Because she has adopted four children through DYFS she has personal experience with the agency. Ms. Toler and her husband were also foster parents for many years. She referenced the Jackson case and stated, "Homeschooling, however, was not the cause of the Jackson's problems. Laws to prevent such horrible cases are already in place, but the procedures are not always followed." Because DYFS is having repeated internal management problems, it is always in turmoil.

She suggested that Ms. Wienberg (the sponsor of AB 4033) is using homeschoolers as the scapegoats because they do not want to face the responsibility that DYFS and ultimately the lawmakers have for the Jackson case. She concluded by saying, "We are here to ask Ms. Weinberg, the entire Assembly, the Senate, and the Governor to halt this unjust persecution of innocent homeschooling families. We ask them to have the courage to take care of business in their own agencies and to stop the injustice of blaming our good families for the failure of DYFS. Adding more regulations is not the answer. Fixing problems in areas that are currently regulated is the answer."

Carolee Adams of the Eagle Forum spoke next. She stressed the financial toll this bill would take on New Jersey's classrooms. She said, "With New Jersey's \$5 billion state deficit...many districts could see little or no new funding for the third year in a row and towns will face pressure to increase property taxes to cover rising school costs. If A4033 is passed, it will add more costs to our towns' beleaguered school budgets, perhaps, depriving them of resources for public school students in order to unnecessarily test us and pay for other expensive administrative costs." The No Child Left Behind Act signed by President Bush stated that homeschoolers could not be forced to take federal tests. New Jersey could also lose its federal funding.

Shockingly, bills like this are introduced without giving a cost analysis to the taxpayer.

Mrs. Adams concluded by stating, "New Jersey taxpayers and home educators say: Enough is enough!"

Ray Stoeber, President of ENOCH of NJ, also spoke informally declaring that this was an historic occasion for homeschooling in New Jersey. He told those in the room to look around to see who was there and that they would remember this day all their lives. He asked homeschoolers to have patience with the leaders representing the homeschool community. There were all different types of homeschoolers present, each with their own ideals and methodology. There will not always be agreement, but we all need to work together to defeat this bill. He also stated that the homeschool leaders at the press conference today will continue to work together to determine what steps should be next in our battle.