‘No Schoolers’: How Illinois’ Hands-Off Approach to Homeschooling Leaves Children at Risk

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It was on L.J.’s 11th birthday, in December 2022, that child welfare workers finally took him away. They arrived at his central Illinois home to investigate an abuse allegation and decided on the spot to remove the boy along with his baby
brother and sister — the “Irish twins,” as their parents called them.

His mother begged to keep the children while her boyfriend told child welfare workers and the police called to the scene that they could take L.J.: “You wanna take someone? Take that little motherf—- down there or wherever the f— he is at. I’ve been trying to get him out of here for a long time.”

By that time, L.J. told authorities he hadn’t been in a classroom for years, according to police records. First came COVID-19. Then, in August 2021 when he was going to have to repeat the third grade, his mother and her boyfriend decided that L.J. would be homeschooled and that they would be his teachers. In an instant, his world shrank to the confines of a one-bedroom apartment in the small Illinois college town of Charleston — no teachers, counselors or classmates.

In that apartment, L.J. would later tell police, he was beaten and denied food: Getting leftovers from the refrigerator was punishable by a whipping with a belt; sass was met with a slap in the face.

L.J. told police he got no lessons or schoolwork at home. Asked if he had learned much, L.J. replied, “Not really.”

L.J. told police that he was sometimes left alone to care for his baby siblings and punished for eating food without permission, according to Charleston Police Department records.

Reporters are using the first and middle initials of the boy, who is now 12 and
remains in state custody, to protect his identity.

While each state has different regulations for homeschooling — and most of them are relatively weak — Illinois is among a small minority that places virtually no rules on parents who homeschool their children: The parents aren’t required to register with any governmental agency, and no tests are required. Under Illinois law, they must provide an education equivalent to what is offered in public schools, covering core subjects like math, language arts, science and health. But parents don’t have to have a high school diploma or GED, and state authorities cannot compel them to demonstrate their teaching methods or prove attendance, curriculum or testing outcomes.

The Illinois State Board of Education said in a statement that regional education offices are empowered by Illinois law to request evidence that a family that homeschools is providing an adequate course of instruction. But, the spokesperson said, their “ability to intervene can be limited.”

Educational officials say this lack of regulation allows parents to pull vulnerable children like L.J. from public schools then not provide any education for them. They call them “no schoolers.”

No oversight also means children schooled at home lose the protections schools provide, including teachers, counselors, coaches and bus drivers — school personnel legally bound to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Under Illinois law, parents may homeschool even if they would be disqualified from working with youth in any other setting; this includes parents with violent criminal records or pending child abuse investigations, or those found to have abused children in the past.

The number of students from preschool to 12th grade enrolled in the state’s public schools has dropped by about 127,000 since the pandemic began. Enrollment losses have outpaced declines in population, according to a report by Advance Illinois, a nonprofit education policy and advocacy organization. And, despite conventional wisdom, the drop was also not the result of wealthier families moving their children to private schools: After the pandemic, private school enrollment declined too, according to the same report.

In the face of this historic exodus from public schools, Capitol News Illinois and ProPublica set out to examine the lack of oversight by education and child welfare
systems when some of those children disappear into families later accused of no-
schooling and, sometimes, abuse and neglect.

Reporters found no centralized system for investigating homeschooling concerns. Educational officials said they were ill equipped to handle cases where parents are accused of neglecting their children’s education. They also said the state’s laws made it all but impossible to intervene in cases where parents claim they are homeschooling. Reporters also found that under the current structure, concerns about homeschooling bounce between child welfare and education authorities, with no entity fully prepared to step in.

“Although we have parents that do a great job of homeschooling, we have many ‘no schoolers’” said Angie Zarvell, superintendent of a regional education office about 100 miles southwest of Chicago that covers three counties and 23 school districts. “The damage this is doing to small rural areas is great. These children will not have the basic skills needed to be contributing members of society.”

Regional education offices, like the one Zarvell oversees, are required by law to identify children who are truant and try to help get them back into school.

But once parents claim they are homeschooling, “our hands are tied,” said Superintendent Michelle Mueller, whose regional office is located about 60 miles north of St. Louis.

Even the state’s child welfare agency can do little: Reports to its child abuse hotline alleging that parents are depriving their children of an education have multiplied, but the Department of Children and Family Services doesn’t investigate schooling matters. Instead, it passes reports to regional education offices.

Todd Vilardo, who since 2017 has been superintendent of the school district where L.J. was enrolled, said he is seeing more and more children outside of school during the day. He wonders, “Aren’t they supposed to be in school?” But I’m reminded that maybe they’re homeschooled,” said Vilardo, who has worked in the Charleston school district for 33 years. “Then I’m reminded that there are very few effective checks and balances on home schools.”
“A Huge Crack in Our System”

There’s no way to determine the precise number of children who are homeschooled. In 2022, 4,493 children were recorded as withdrawn to homeschool, a number that is likely much higher because Illinois doesn’t require parents to register homeschooled children. That is a little more than double the number a decade before.

In late fall of 2020, L.J. was one of the kids who slipped out of school. After a roughly five-month hiatus from the classroom during the pandemic, L.J.’s school resumed in-person classes. The third grader, however, was frequently absent.

At home, tensions ran high. In the 640-square-foot apartment, L.J.’s mother, Ashley White, and her boyfriend, Brian Anderson, juggled the demands of three children including two born just about 10 months apart.

White, now 31, worked at a local fast-food restaurant. Anderson, now 51, who uses a wheelchair, had applied for disability payments. Anderson doesn’t have a valid driver’s license. The family lived in a subsidized housing complex for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.

In an interview with reporters in late February, 14 months after L.J. had been taken into custody by the state, the couple offered a range of explanations for why he hadn’t been in school. L.J. had been suspended and barred from returning, they said, though school records show no expulsion. They also said they had tried to put L.J. in an alternative school for children with special needs, but he didn’t have a diagnosis that qualified him to attend.

The couple made clear they believed that L.J. was a problem child who could get them in trouble; they said they thought he could get them sued. In the interview, Anderson called L.J. a pathological liar, a thief and a bad kid.

“I have 11 kids, never had a problem with any of them, never,” Anderson said. “I’ve never had a problem like this,” he said of L.J. The boy, he said, lacked discipline and continued to get “worse and worse and worse every year” he’d known him.

To support the idea that L.J. was combative, White provided a copy of a screenshot taken from a school chat forum in which the boy cursed at his
schoolmates.

At the end of the school year, in spring 2021, the principal told White and Anderson that the boy would have to repeat the third grade. Rather than have L.J. held back, the couple pulled him out of school to homeschool. They didn’t have to fill out any paperwork or give a reason.

On any given day in Illinois, a parent can make that same decision. That’s due to a series of court and legislative decisions that strengthened parents’ rights against state interference in how they educate their children.

In 1950, the Illinois Supreme Court heard a case involving college-educated parents who kept their 7-year-old daughter at home. Those parents, Seventh-day Adventists, argued that a public school education produced a “pugnacious character” and believed the mother was the best teacher and nature was the best textbook. The judges ruled in their favor, finding that, in many respects under the law, homeschools are essentially like private schools: not required to register kids with the state and not subject to testing or curriculum mandates.

In 1989, the legislature voted to change how educational neglect cases are handled. Before the vote, DCFS was allowed to investigate parents who failed to ensure their child’s education just as it does other types of neglect. In a bipartisan vote, the General Assembly changed that, in part to reduce caseloads on DCFS — which has been overburdened and inadequately staffed for decades — and also in response to concerns about state interference from families who homeschool.

Since then, DCFS has referred complaints about schooling that come in to its child abuse hotline over to regional offices of education. The letter accompanying the educational neglect referral form ends with: “This notice is for your information and pursuit only. No response to this office is required.”
The Department of Children and Family Services forwards educational neglect claims made to its hotline to regional offices of education handling truancy, stating educational officials need not report findings back.

Tierney Stutz, executive deputy director at DCFS, said that regional education officials are welcome to report back findings, but that “DCFS does not have statutory authority to act on this information.”

“Unfortunately, this is a huge crack in our system,” said Amber Quirk, regional superintendent of the office of education that covers densely populated DuPage County in the Chicago suburbs.

To see how this system is working, reporters obtained more than 450 of these educational neglect reports, representing over a third of the more than 1,200 forwarded by DCFS over three years ending in 2023. About 10% of them specifically cited substandard homeschooling claims. But officials said that in many of the other reported cases of kids out of school, they found that families also claimed they were homeschooling.

Faced with cases of truancy or educational neglect, county prosecutors can press charges against parents. But if they do, parents can lean on Illinois’ parental protections when they defend themselves in court from a truancy charge.

That’s been the experience of Dirk Muffler, who oversees truancy intervention at a regional office of education covering five counties in west-central Illinois. “We’ve gone through an entire truancy process, literally standing on the courthouse steps getting ready to walk in to screen a kid into court and the parents say, ‘We are homeschooling.’ I have to just walk away then.”

More recently, the ISBE made one more decision to loosen the monitoring of parents who homeschool: For years, school districts and regional offices
distributed voluntary registration forms to families who homeschool, some of whom returned them. Then last year, the state agency told those regional offices that they no longer had to send those forms to ISBE.

“The homeschool registration form was being misinterpreted in some instances that ISBE was reviewing or approving homeschool programs, which it does not have statutory authority to do,” an ISBE spokesperson told the news organizations.

Over the years, the legislature has taken up proposals to strengthen the state’s oversight of homeschooling. In 2011, lawmakers considered requiring parents to notify their local school districts of their intent to homeschool, and in 2019 they considered calling for DCFS to inspect all homeschools and have ISBE approve their curriculum.

Each time, however, the state’s strong homeschooling lobby, mostly made up of religious-based organizations, stepped in.

This March, under sponsorship of the Illinois Christian Home Educators, homeschoolers massed at the state Capitol as they have for decades for Cherry Pie Day, bringing pies to each of the state’s 177 lawmakers.
Families who homeschool and their supporters assembled at the Illinois Capitol in March to give lawmakers cherry pies, a gesture of gratitude for maintaining regulation-free homeschooling. Kirk Smith, the organization’s executive director and former public school teacher, summed up his group’s appeal to lawmakers: “All we want is to be left alone. And Illinois has been so good. We have probably the best state in the nation to homeschool.”

“Nobody Knows. He’s Not in School.”

Just days after child protection workers took 11-year-old L.J. into protective custody on his birthday, a 9-year-old homeschooled boy, 240 miles away, disappeared and was missing for months before police went looking for him.

Though the case of Zion Staples was covered in the media, it has not been previously reported that his homeschooling status delayed the discovery of his death.

Zion had been living in Rock Island, in the northwest part of the state, with his mother, Sushi Staples. The family had a long history of abuse and neglect investigations by DCFS, and Staples had lost two kids to foster care in Illinois nearly two decades before because she mistreated them; the children were not returned to her. The most recent investigation by DCFS was in 2021. The department did not find enough evidence to find mistreatment and the case was closed.

Despite her past involvement with child welfare services, no Illinois laws restricted her from homeschooling the children who remained in her care, including Zion and five others who were then ages 8 to 14.

When reporters asked DCFS for his schooling status, the agency’s responses revealed considerable confusion about where he was being educated. DCFS originally told the news organizations that Zion was enrolled in an online school program, but the company that DCFS said had been providing his schooling told reporters that Zion had never been enrolled. DCFS later clarified that his mother said he was leaving public school in August 2021 to attend an online program, but no one was required to verify this information.

On a December morning in 2022, Staples told police she returned home from
Running errands and found Zion dead. A coroner would later find that he died from an accidental, self-inflicted shot fired from a gun the children found in the house. His mother hid the body and later confided to her friend, Laterrica Wilson, that she did it because she did not want to risk losing her other children.

“She said: ‘Nobody knows. He’s not in school. He’s homeschooled. I’ve got this figured out,’” Wilson recalled in an interview with a reporter about a conversation she had with Staples a few months after the child had died. “She said she had too much to lose.”

Wilson, who lives in Florida, said it was one of several calls she had with Staples over the course of months as she tried to figure out what had happened and what to do about it. Police records indicate that in July, in response to a call from Wilson, they visited the home. Staples denied the child even existed. Later, when police executed a search warrant, officers found Zion’s body in a metal trash can in the garage; he was still wearing his Spiderman pajama bottoms. He’d been dead for seven months, an autopsy revealed.

Staples was charged with concealing a death, failure to report the death of a child within 24 hours and obstructing justice. Staples pleaded guilty to felony endangering the health of a child in February and was sentenced to two years in prison in April.

Staples did not respond to a letter sent to her in prison seeking comment on this case.

DCFS and its university partners study all sorts of risks to children involved with the child welfare system, but they’ve never examined homeschooling and do not track the number of children the agency comes in contact with who are homeschooled. While the agency’s inspector general is required to file reports on every child who dies in foster care or whose family the agency had investigated within the preceding year of the child’s death, the children’s schooling status is rarely noted in them.

For L.J., homeschooling rules also blinded school officials to abuse he suffered, although their administrative office is within sight of his apartment complex. About five months passed from when he was withdrawn to homeschool in the summer of 2021 before the first signs of help arrived. Following a call to its hotline in January 2022, DCFS found White and Anderson neglectful, citing
inadequate supervision, but that did not result in L.J. returning to school. DCFS offered services, but Anderson and White declined.

DCFS received more calls to its hotline in June 2022 and again that September, alleging that Anderson and White had mistreated L.J. In both of those cases, DCFS investigators did not find enough evidence to support those allegations and closed the cases.

The caller in September told DCFS the boy appeared malnourished. L.J. hadn’t been in school since 2019, the caller reported. But DCFS said they did not pursue an investigation into his schooling matters because it wasn’t in their policies to do so.

It did send an educational neglect report to Kyle Thompson, the superintendent of schools overseeing the regional office of education in Charleston. The form didn’t mention physical abuse, but it did say that L.J. had begged for food from neighbors, that doctors were concerned about his weight and that a DCFS caseworker had recently visited the home but no one had answered the door.

Thompson was in his office when the educational neglect report ended up on his desk on an October afternoon. Alarmed when he read the allegations, Thompson went to the apartment that same day. White and Anderson came to the door, Thompson recalled, and eventually agreed to meet with school officials.

“I really feel like we may have saved that kid’s life that day,” Thompson said.

But Anderson and White continued to keep L.J. at home.

In November, a grocery store manager found L.J. in the parking lot begging for quarters and called police, who took L.J. home and later issued a ticket to White and Anderson for violating a city truancy ordinance. L.J. hadn’t been to school the
Anderson said he didn’t know why he was cited, since he was homeschooling. “Apparently, it wasn’t good enough for the school system,” he told reporters.

A few days later, police and child welfare services again visited the home and found welts and bruises on L.J.’s back. L.J. said Anderson had beaten him with a belt as punishment for eating leftover Salisbury steak and potatoes without permission. The boy also told child welfare workers he had not showered for two weeks.

Anderson and White would later tell reporters L.J. was on a diet of fruits and vegetables because he was too fat and prediabetic, but L.J. told police he ate mostly cereal. Though DCFS found credible evidence of both neglect and abuse in its November and December investigations, the couple said they did not abuse L.J. or deny him an education. They are still trying to get the two younger children back, but they say they don’t want L.J. In an April court custody hearing, a judge in their child welfare case admonished them for not accepting responsibility for their treatment of L.J., including keeping him from school.

For its part, the state did ultimately take responsibility for L.J.’s schooling: Caseworkers took the children into custody on a Friday. The following Monday, L.J. returned to public school.

*Mollie Simon of ProPublica contributed research. Andrew Adams of Capitol News Illinois contributed data reporting. Have a news tip regarding homeschooling, chronic truancy or educational neglect? Email them to Molly Parker or Beth Hundsdorfer at investigations@capitolnewsillinois.com.*