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Daily news reports about 16 Ohio children living in one room in a small house in Vinton County are shocking. The unregulated school choice environment in Ohio contributes to this kind of societal neglect.

16 children living in one room. 16 small kittens could hardly survive in that venue! How could this happen without public awareness?

Unregulated homeschooling and other state-authorized, unregulated school choice programs make it essentially impossible for school officials to account for all school age children in Ohio.

Time was when school district officials were responsible for accounting for all school-age children. With the school choice rage in place, there are too many cooks in the kitchen. There is now no central registry for school-age students.

Homeschooling is unregulated. Charter schools are scantly regulated and/or monitored. Private schools are neither transparent nor monitored. I personally have been aware of several families whose children receive little or no educational programs and services. State officials are devoted to school choice with no regard for the devastating effects on thousands of Ohio children.

An August 30 Columbus Dispatch editorial provides a perspective on how society has failed some Vinton County children. This Vinton County fiasco is not the only case in point.

THE CONVERSATION

DISPATCH EDITORIAL

Ohio must do better to protect kids like the Siders children

Rotten teeth. Insect bites. A feces-laden rental home infested with roaches. Lead poisoning. A lack of food, education and basic medical care.

The horrific conditions officials allege 16 Vinton County children, aged 18 months to 18 years, endured are enough to turn your stomach, break your heart and wonder how many other Ohio children are languishing unheard and unseen, and how many more can be protected, saved or spared suffering.

The Siders children's parents, Gary Jr. and Elizabeth Siders, and their grandparents, Gary Sr. and Christina Siders, have pleaded not guilty to felony child endangerment.

Gary Jr. and Elizabeth also face child abuse charges, as do extended family members Josh Saunders and Brandon Henderson.

The state of Ohio must also evaluate the part it played − and potentially still plays − in tragedies like the ones that unfolded within the Siders family. There's one relatively easy solution and others that are more complex.

Close the child marriage loophole

Ohio's marriage age was raised to18 in 2019 with dangerous exceptions that allow 17-year-olds to wed. The notion that children were marrying other children is false. Children, the vast majority of them girls, were marrying men, who by virtue of their age had the power. Of the 2,541 children married in Ohio since 2000, 96% married adults.

That was the case for some members of the Siders family.

Long before Ohio marriage law changed, at least three Siders women were child brides.

Elizabeth Russell married 19-year-old Gary Siders Jr. just across the Ohio River from Gallia County in West Virginia in March 2008. She was 15 years old. They had the first of their 18 children that May.

Another relative was just 14 and pregnant when she married a 48-year-old member of the family in Gallia County in 2002. The third was 15 when she married Gary Siders's late cousin in that same county in 2003.

A bipartisan bill sponsored by Sen. Bill Blessing R-Colerain Township, and Sen. Bill DeMora, D-Columbus, would have closed a loophole that allows 17-year-olds to marry but was denied a vote in June. Lawmakers should seize the moment and approve it when they return after the November elections.

Children – even 17-year-olds married with their parents' permission – are vulnerable to sexual, physical, emotional and financial abuse by adult spouses and shouldn't be allowed to marry in Ohio.

Addressing holes in the system

As urgent as closing the marriage loophole may be, Ohio also needs to determine why the Siders children fell through the cracks and how those gaps can be addressed.

According to 2020 court records obtained by The Dispatch, the Siders family said the children had been homeschooled before enrolling in Gallia Digital Academy and Ohio Virtual Academy. One of the Siders children finished none of her coursework.

When they were allegedly found hidden away in a 12-foot-by-12-foot room in July, none of the Siders children were enrolled in school. Some, an uncle included, assumed the children were homeschooled. But according to NBC 4, Vinton County Local Schools had no record of the Siders kids attending school or being educated at home.

To be clear, homeschooling is the right option for many families. Still, there is a concerning lack of oversight.

It is unclear whether the alleged abuse would have been detected if the children had been homeschooled, as the family claimed.

Ohio's homeschool rules have been bare-bones since House Bill 33 gutted them in 2023.

Ohio parents who homeschool their children are required only to notify their local school superintendent each year that they will be doing so and teach English language arts, mathematics, science, history, government, and social studies, except where they conflict with religious beliefs.

House Bill 33 removed the minimum number of instructional hours and student assessment tests. Parents or guardians also do not need a specific degree, license or diploma to teach the 60,000 Ohio children receiving home education.

There is no longer a requirement for records or a portfolio reviewed by an assessor. Parents do not have to show a curriculum or textbook list, and there are no credit or course count requirements for graduation.

The system failed the Siders children, but there were red flags from educators when they did enroll in public schools.

Gallia County Children Services investigated the Siders family in both 2020 and 2021, resulting in "protective supervision" but no children being removed from the home.

The first investigation began after educators reported significant educational and developmental delays among the children who enrolled in online schools.

According to documents obtained by The Dispatch, a 7-year-old girl had never been seen by a pediatrician and lacked the ability to speak in complete sentences or start conversations. Her 11-year-old sister couldn't count beyond 12 and didn't know all the letters of the alphabet. A 5-year-old couldn't speak "any clear language."

We don’t understand why a judge did not remove these children when twice presented with clear evidence of their needs.

Later in 2021, six of the Siders children, ages 7 to 13, were deemed habitually truant under Ohio law, but the court couldn’t find Gary Jr. and Elizabeth Siders to serve them.

Another court will determine the fates of the adults charged in the Siders family case.

Ohio lawmakers have an opportunity to use this case to assess if we are doing enough to protect our most precious assets: our children.

There is no need to wait for a verdict in the criminal cases. Completely close the door on child marriage in Ohio. Restore oversight of home education. Demand answers from agencies entrusted with the welfare of Ohio children and help them – financially and otherwise – implement fixes.

Ohio cannot undo what allegedly happened to the Siders children, but it can help ensure others are not left to suffer in the dark.

This piece was written by Dispatch Opinion Editor Amelia Robinson on behalf of the editorial board of The Columbus Dispatch. Editorials are factbased assessments of issues of importance to the communities we serve. These are not the opinions of our reporting staff members, who strive for neutrality in their reporting.