



Written by [Alex Newman](#) on December 3, 2012

## Homeschoolers Worldwide Join Forces

In October of 2005, the Neubronner family (pictured) decided to homeschool. In America, that would have been the end of the story. The Neubronners, however, lived in Germany, where government has taken an extreme hardline stance with the aim of eradicating home education altogether. The loving German parents applied for permission to educate their two young sons, Morris and Thomas, at home.



Unsurprisingly, their application was rejected.

Over the next few months, the battle seemed interminable. They sued for permission to homeschool and lost. Then they appealed. Again, they lost. Finally, in the summer of 2006, the Neubronners struck a deal with school authorities: The boys could be homeschooled provided they were tested regularly. Like the vast majority of homeschoolers, the kids did great on the government's tests.

Despite the high marks, or perhaps because of them, eventually, authorities decided to put an end to the successful home education scheme. The Neubronner parents were threatened with massive fines, and like many other homeschoolers in Germany, even a potential jail sentence was put on the table if they refused to comply. During that time, the family appealed all the way up to the German constitutional court.

As the fight was unfolding, the family's story became national news, with mother Dagmar, a biologist and publisher, becoming the face of the secular homeschooling movement in Germany. The media coverage ranged from friendly to neutral because the family seemed — aside from the homeschooling, at least — like a rather "normal," well-integrated, intellectual family without any particular ax to grind against government schools; they simply wanted to exercise their right not to use that particular government "service."

When the family refused to pay the exorbitant fines, officials burst into their home and ransacked it, searching for something, anything, to take with them. They found nothing worthwhile, but the horror was just getting started. Finally, officials froze the family's bank accounts. They even threatened to arrest both parents and auction their home to pay the fines.

In September of 2007, the German courts ruled on a parallel homeschooling case, saying in the verdict that failing to surrender one's children to compulsory schooling was justification enough to remove parental custody over them. So, in early 2008, the Neubronner family decided it was time to go; they moved across the border to an apartment in France, where home education, as in the vast majority of European countries, is legal.

"I never imagined I would have to face a persecution like this, with threat of prison, a bailiff in our house, and having to leave our country because of risk of losing custody," Neubronner told *The New American*. "Often we felt like we were in a bad movie from another century. It is a shame that a highly developed country like Germany sticks to a law that is founded on Hitler's 'Reichsschulpflichtgesetz' [the National Socialist regime's compulsory schooling act] from 1938."



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While maintaining their primary residence in France keeps the family safe from further persecution, it takes a lot of time, effort, and money. From time to time, the police still show up at the Neubronners' house in Germany to ensure that the children really are living in France, so the family will probably have to continue living the "nomadic" lifestyle until Thomas, the youngest, currently 13, reaches adulthood. Until then, authorities will continue trying to force the kids into the government school system.

In early November of this year, however, Dagmar Neubronner was back in Germany — to raise awareness about the persecution for the hundreds of homeschooling families that still live in Germany, always trying to stay one step ahead of the social services and other authorities, and the hundreds of other families that have already fled the country.

Many parents, she said, need help fleeing immediately to avoid losing their children. Sometimes, authorities even try to prevent families from leaving the country by claiming that the parents are "abusing" their custody rights in attempting to escape Germany to avoid compulsory schooling.

Speaking at a workshop on homeschooling in exile, Dagmar took the microphone and introduced herself. It took her a few moments to stop sobbing, but eventually she recounted her family's story — standing up for her children and their education despite having to flee her homeland. The attendees, more than a few of whom failed to contain their own tears, were clearly inspired by hearing about the ordeal firsthand.

It is very difficult to be forced to flee one's homeland, she explained with tears welling up in her eyes. "Once you're in a new country, with a new language and a new culture, you realize how big the sacrifice is," Neubronner said. "We risked everything we could risk — fines, jail. But we left at the moment where we couldn't be sure about keeping custody of the children.... My very first responsibility as a mother is for the well-being of my children — not any political goal. I can fight for political goals until it comes to the point where I can't assure the well-being of my children."

Fortunately for persecuted homeschooling families, it is possible to legally homeschool in all of the countries bordering Germany — some families have even registered in neighboring nations while still spending much of the time in their homeland. Among the primary refuges for German homeschooling refugees, Neubronner said, are Austria, Switzerland, France, Ireland, the United Kingdom, Poland, Belgium, Denmark, and Sweden — at least before the Swedish Parliament passed its own draconian prohibition, implemented last year.

Some exiles even fled to Canada and the United States, where a U.S. immigration judge criticized the German government's persecution when granting a family asylum. "We can't expect every country to follow our Constitution. The world might be a better place if it did. However, the rights being violated here are basic human rights that no country has a right to violate," explained federal U.S. Judge Lawrence Burman in his decision.

### **Global Conference**

Neubronner was speaking not only as a persecuted homeschooling parent, but also as the vice-chairwoman of the first ever Global Home Education Conference (GHEC). Converging on Berlin from October 31 to November 4, some 200 homeschooling leaders, attorneys, policymakers, human rights activists, and experts held a historic conference uniting proponents of home education from all over the world. More than two dozen countries from every continent except Antarctica were represented.

The diversity among attendees was astounding: Christians, secularists, conservatives, liberals,



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libertarians, and more, all working together to promote homeschooling and human rights worldwide. By the end of the summit, activists began returning to their homelands armed with a historic declaration and a new sense of unity across borders and beliefs in the effort to expand that natural right to freedom in education.

Of course, much of GHEC dealt with subjects that can only be described as depressing — vicious persecution of home educating families in countries like Germany and Sweden, for example. Tears were shed during more than a few other workshops held at the gathering, as parents told of their courageous struggles to educate their children in the face of hostile authorities. Homeschooling in forced exile was a regular topic, too.

However, a sense of optimism radiated from the newly emboldened participants: confidence that educational liberty, despite the current difficulties, will eventually triumph over the forces seeking to quash it. And today, parental rights over the education of children are almost universally recognized, leaders said, at least in parts of the world not ruled by open dictatorships.

In terms of homeschooling, the United States was frequently referenced as a special success story and, in many respects, a beacon of educational liberty and hope for the planet. But even worldwide, according to experts who spoke to *The New American* at the summit, the trends are mostly encouraging as well.

Even the controversial United Nations' so-called Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example — while largely a list of government-issued privileges purportedly revocable on a whim — concedes that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children,” as more than a few activists at the conference pointed out. Multiple European human rights treaties enshrine parental rights and home education as well.

However, under certain totalitarian regimes, as well as in Sweden and Germany, those rights, which in reality are unalienable regardless of what international documents say, are often trampled upon by government. Still, activists, liberty-minded policymakers, and homeschooling parents — even those not directly affected by the lawless persecution — vowed not to give up in the battle to protect and expand the right of families everywhere, not politicians, to direct the education and upbringing of children.

In an interview at the summit, Michael Farris, founder and chairman of the U.S.-based Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) and chancellor of Patrick Henry College told *The New American* that governments persecuting homeschoolers should be identified for what they are: “rogue states” that do not deserve to be considered “civilized.” According to the world-renowned expert, who cited a wide array of human rights treaties and agreements, such regimes are violating some of the most fundamental internationally accepted human rights norms.

“We need to stand up for freedom everywhere,” Farris concluded, noting that the conference was held in Berlin partly for the symbolism — the wall coming down and the triumph of freedom — but also to draw attention to the German government’s outlandish violations of human rights. At its core, Farris added, the battle over home education is really a conflict between liberty and socialism, which are inherently incompatible. Liberty must win out.

### **Persecution Sparks Exodus**

Two leaders in the European home education movement, Jonas Himmelstrand, a father and prominent expert from Sweden, and Dagmar Neubronner of Germany drew a wide range of emotions from the audience at a workshop session as they told the packed conference room about life in exile and the



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heart-rending decision to flee abroad. While each of their stories was unique, both parents were forced to escape from their homelands owing to relentless government persecution when they refused to stop homeschooling.

Himmelstrand, the chairman of the GHEC, is the president of the Swedish Home Education Association (ROHUS). Like the Neubronner family, the Himmelstrands also live in exile, having fled to Finland as “homeschooling refugees” after the Uppsala municipality adopted a restrictive view on homeschooling — a process that began even before the national government tarnished its image with a law purporting to ban home education in 2010.

As *The New American* reported early this year, Himmelstrand was forced to flee from Sweden when officials threatened his family with massive fines and potential retaliation by social services. “We cannot live with the fear of the threat that our children will be taken away,” Himmelstrand told GHEC attendees, explaining his decision to escape from Sweden after the family received a letter from social authorities. “The moment we got that letter, we knew the move was close.”

At least a dozen other Swedish families Himmelstrand knows personally have already fled abroad, too, he said. Many of them, including other members of the ROHUS board, now live on the semi-autonomous Finnish Aland Islands where Swedish is spoken. Still, some brave homeschooling families have decided to risk the fines and even the threat of having their children seized to stay in Sweden and defy the ban — for now at least.

The situation in Germany is similar: Many persecuted homeschooling families have already escaped abroad, but some have not left yet for various reasons. Himmelstrand dispensed some advice for the victims of persecution who have not thus far fled to more liberty-minded countries: Plan beforehand, decide what the final line in the sand is, and make escape plans to be kept between the parents. If and when the line is crossed, act on the plan and run.

Attorney Ruby Harrold-Claesson, who spoke at the GHEC and also serves as chairman of the pro-family Nordic Committee for Human Rights (NKMR), told *The New American* in an interview that Sweden has “insurmountable” problems with its human rights record — especially as it relates to family and religion.

She hosted a workshop about the now-infamous Johansson family case, in which authorities seized then-seven-year-old Domenic from his parents, citing homeschooling as a reason for the abduction. “It is difficult to call Sweden a civilized, democratic society, because there are so many violations of human rights on so many levels,” Harrold-Claesson explained, pointing to out-of-control bureaucracies and lawless legislation purporting to ban home education.

Throughout the GHEC, distraught parents from Sweden and Germany told horror stories about their home education-linked run-ins with authorities. German mother Iris Naumann, for example, tried to homeschool her son after he suffered intense bullying. She was refused permission, and the schooling issues eventually played a role in the loss of custody over her kids.

Separately, the Wunderlich parents lost formal custody of their children because they were homeschooling. While the kids had not been removed from the home, the father told TNA that if he tried to leave Germany with his family, authorities would consider it “kidnapping.” Their saga is far from over.

Jurgen Dudek, a Christian father of eight children who homeschooled for over a decade, was even sentenced to prison, along with his wife, for home educating, though he won on appeal — for now. “If



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you are a homeschooler in Germany, you are definitely in for problems with the authorities and the social services,” he told TNA in an interview, adding that he wanted to stay in his homeland to put a human face on the persecution endured by so many homeschooling families.

Another German mother could not stop crying as she told attendees at a separate workshop that she had been forced to flee from her homeland twice already, once from the communist regime in East Germany, and later from unified Germany due to homeschooling persecution. Incredibly, she was not the only one in attendance forced to endure such tragedy.

### **Homeschooling Around the World**

Experts and leaders who spoke to *The New American* said the home education situation around the world was mixed. “Germany and Sweden are certainly the worst among the worst,” said senior legal counsel with the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) Roger Kiska, adding that certain formerly communist Eastern European governments are also trying to restrict home education to varying degrees.

“The good news is that we are fighting these cases — we have too many cases where children are being taken from their parents, parents are being put in prison, for no reason whatsoever,” the Vienna-based attorney added in an interview with TNA, saying concerned Americans could pray, donate, or write letters to officials on behalf of persecuted victims. “It’s really just a matter of time; we just have to keep on fighting.”

It was not all bad news, however. More than a few experts said the global trends were encouraging. Even countries ruled by governments that are not famous for their sterling human rights records put Sweden and Germany to shame by comparison on homeschooling, which analysts said was a positive sign that the tide was turning in favor of educational freedom.

In Russia, for example, homeschooling is completely legal under federal law, which explicitly guarantees the freedom of parents to educate their children at home anywhere in the country. The movement is also growing throughout Russia, with estimates suggesting that many tens of thousands of families are already exercising their rights, possibly more.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, which has endured more than its fair share of tyranny as well, homeschooling is also legally protected and expanding. “There are problems, but in actual fact, South African homeschoolers operate quite freely, on the whole, and the numbers are growing all the time,” said Leendert van Oostrum, president of a prominent South African homeschooling defense fund.

In the United States, where homeschooling is legal in every state and the District of Columbia, as well as protected by the U.S. Constitution, home education advocates have largely won the battle now. There are, of course, still occasional threats to homeschoolers, but for the most part, Americans, along with Canadians, have among the most robust legal protections for home education in the world.

John Klenk, the recently retired chief of the Office of Non-Public Education at the U.S. Department of Education, who served for almost three decades, starting under Reagan and finishing in 2009 under Obama, spoke to *The New American*. He said that the fact that the U.S. government now recognizes homeschooling as a completely valid form of education, even under the Obama administration, shows “how mainstream home education has become in recent years.”

“In America, parents are guaranteed the right to educate children as they see fit, so we don’t have that same existential threat that they have in Germany, Sweden, and some other places where



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homeschooling is illegal,” Klenk explained. When homeschooled children began winning national competitions, scoring extremely well on standardized tests, and being accepted to elite universities while performing better in higher education than their government-schooled peers, public acceptance began to increase, too.

The opposition to home education that does exist, he said, stems largely from the ideological convictions of much of the government-educational complex. “The success of homeschooling is really an offense [to them] because it shows that, by ignoring all of the shibboleths of the education establishment, you really have not only kids that can learn very well, who compete in national competitions very well, but kids who are growing up to be well-adjusted,” Klenk said, citing research showing that homeschooled children tend to get along better with adults and are less likely to succumb to peer pressure.

### **The Future of Educational Freedom**

Even in Germany, top German lawmakers spoke out about the abuses and called for an end to the ban on homeschooling. Norbert Blüm, a federal lawmaker, human rights campaigner, and the former German minister of labor under ex-Chancellor Helmut Kohl, issued a forceful condemnation of his government’s education policies while defending home education.

“Today I observe a total usurpation of children by school,” declared Blüm, a member of Angela Merkel’s Christian Democratic Union, in a statement that was widely praised around the world. “I am against the state’s education monopoly and see parents responsibly homeschooling as a healthy response to an imperious school system.”

Another prominent German lawmaker who spoke out was Parliamentarian Patrick Meinhardt, education spokesman for the liberty-minded Free Democratic Party (FDP) parliamentary group and a heavyweight in the broader European movement for freedom. As a keynote speaker at the GHEC, Meinhardt also said homeschooling should not be restricted.

With the tide of public opinion turning against the Nazi-era ban on home education in Germany, activists and homeschooling leaders are especially optimistic about the situation there. Sweden, which only banned educational liberty completely in 2010, would likely not be able to withstand the immense pressure as the only remaining Western government to brazenly violate the human rights of home educators.

Boston University educational leadership Professor Charles L. Glenn, a former official in the Massachusetts Department of Education and the vice president of an international organization promoting educational freedom and the right to education, told TNA that there was an undeniable trend toward increasing liberty in education worldwide. Eventually, he said, homeschooling and other educational options will expand worldwide.

“I think it’s inevitable, it’s part of a long-term trend that is occurring in which increasingly, people expect to be able to make decisions in more and more spheres of their lives,” Glenn explained. “We are just beyond the idea that you can expect everybody to be playing off the same script. Really, education is one of the last places for that to hit, but the trend of modernity is toward pluralization of life choices, and schooling has to submit to that, as do all the other spheres of life.”

### **The Berlin Declaration**

By the end of the summit, leaders in the homeschooling movement from some two dozen countries



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signed a historic document dubbed the “Berlin Declaration,” demanding that governments around the world respect families and the human right to home education. The agreement also chastized authorities in places such as Germany and Sweden that ruthlessly persecute homeschoolers.

The Berlin Declaration, the first of its kind, argues that the right to home educate must be respected by every jurisdiction — after all, no government can legitimately violate the fundamental rights of citizens. Citing multiple human rights documents and a growing body of evidence showing the benefits of homeschooling, the document’s signatories said the senseless persecution must come to an end.

“It’s an expression of the growing confidence among homeschoolers that this is just another historical struggle for human rights and that we will win,” ROHUS president-in-exile and GHEC Chairman Himmelstrand, who fled from Sweden with his family, told TNA. “The Berlin Declaration shows that these rights are already recognized in various human rights conventions; they simply need to be manifested all over the world.”

With the Berlin Declaration, home education advocates plan to turn the heat up on certain governments for their lawless behavior. Even the UN, blasted as a “dictators club” by critics, has recognized home education as a fundamental human right, activists explained on multiple occasions. It actually took formal action on at least one occasion: In 2007, the UN “Special Rapporteur on Education” officially condemned the German government’s oppression of homeschoolers while stating that home education is an entirely legitimate alternative to state schooling.

Attorney Michael Donnelly, director of international affairs for the HSLDA and a member of the GHEC board, said the Berlin Declaration was historic. It will also be a key tool going forward as activists from around the world work to support each other in the struggle for educational freedom everywhere.

“This is the first ever Global Home Education Conference, so it is really unique — it’s the first time that so many references to international treaties and conventions have been referenced in a single document in this home education context,” Donnelly told TNA.

Aside from the human rights angle, the Berlin Declaration also points to the well-documented success of homeschoolers academically and socially. “We further note that credible and scientific research indicate that home education is an effective means of educating children to become literate and productive citizens and members of civil society,” it explains, echoing a common theme at the conference supported by multiple experts who spoke out in favor of homeschooling and educational freedom.

The declaration was signed by the entire GHEC board. However, as the document was unveiled in front of a packed conference room with close to 200 people, GHEC Chairman Himmelstrand said the goal was to continue gathering signatures and support from organizations and individuals around the world, using the document to keep the pressure growing on hostile governments.

While GHEC attendees hold all sorts of diverse views, they all agreed on a few key points. “We commit to support freedom, diversity and pluralism in education through formal and informal coordination with the goal of making home education a legitimate educational option in every nation and the right of every family and child,” the Berlin Declaration concluded.

With GHEC winding down, participants enjoying a fresh burst of optimism and a newly formed global support network returned to their homelands: Brazil, Russia, Taiwan, South Africa, Canada, the Philippines, South Korea, Ireland, Australia, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Morocco, France, Spain, Nepal, Bulgaria, Austria, Kenya, Finland, Sweden, the United States, Germany, Poland, and more. Berlin Declaration in hand, though, attendees from every corner of the globe said the



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real action was just getting started.

— Photo at top of Neubronner family: AP Images

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