**Newspaper Logic: Akron Beacon Journal Attack on Homeschooling**

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**Have you ever read something you knew was wrong** and just felt frustrated about it? It didn’t make sense, but you couldn’t explain why?

Recently an Ohio newspaper, the *Akron Beacon Journal,* printed a series of articles attacking homeschooling. They claim that little is known about homeschoolers and suggest the government should tightly monitor and regulate the movement. They quote school officials and focus groups who say that homeschooling can hide child abuse and failing students.

This is nothing new. We didn’t pay much attention until a friend told us that the first article mentions our logic book [*The Fallacy Detective*](http://www.fallacydetective.com/products/item/the-fallacy-detective/). Ironically, we discovered that the two reporters who wrote these articles, Doug Oplinger and Dennis J. Willard,  showcase several brazen errors in reasoning.

We’d like to give you a few tools for explaining to your friends, neighbors, and elected officials why using bad logic isn’t a good idea when attacking homeschoolers.

Our purpose isn’t to point out *all* the fallacies in these articles. We want to equip you to do this yourself. (Parents, finding fallacies in these articles might make a good school assignment.) Here is a crash-course in debunking bad newspaper reporting.

**Fallacy 1: Appeal to the People**

Claiming that something is true just because many people believe it is the *fallacy of the appeal to the people*. The *Akron Beacon Journal* articles use this fallacy frequently.

Nationally, according to the most recent polls on the topic, the country is divided on the socialization issue.

A 2001 Phi Delta Kappa poll found that the public, by just a slightly larger percentage (49 to 46), believes home schooling does not promote good citizenship. More than half – 53 percent – of the people who live in the Western United States believe home schooling promotes good citizenship, while only 37 percent in the East agree. (Nov. 16)

. . . .92 percent of [Americans] said home schoolers should take the same tests required of public school students. (Nov. 15)

We may not like to admit it, but we all become uneasy when many people disagree with us. However, public opinion is not a good gauge for what is true or false. Just because a large percentage of the population thinks homeschooling fails to produce good citizens does not make this true. Asserting this would be an *appeal to the people*.

**Fallacy 2: Faulty Appeal to Authority**

Another fallacy used in the *Beacon Journal* articles is *faulty appeal to authority*.

David Swarbrick estimates that “60 percent [of homeschoolers] are on par with the public schools, 20 percent are above and 20 percent are below.” (Nov. 15)

When we read a quote like this, we might worry that it indicates that homeschoolers don’t excel at academics the way we thought.

However, before we accept what Swarbrick says, we need to look at his credentials. Is he an authority on comparing the academic accomplishments of homeschool students to government school students? We read that Swarbrick is a math tutor for 225 homeschool students in Texas. Based on what these articles say, he only has contact with students who need tutoring in math – probably not a good cross section of homeschoolers. To appeal to his expert knowledge would be a faulty appeal to authority. (Note: David Swarbrick has said that he was dreadfully misquoted by Oplinger and Willard.)

. . . there are huge, untested segments of the home-school population that may be failing, according to many researchers. (Nov. 15)

An ambitious reporter can find someone willing to say anything he wants. It means nothing when a reporter writes, “many researchers say. . . .” We can find “many researchers” willing to say there are space aliens living among us. A reporter needs to name the researchers he is quoting and explain their credentials. Otherwise, he is using a *faulty appeal to authority*.

**Fallacy 3: Proof by Lack of Evidence**

. . . [T]he nation [collects] an unprecedented volume of statistics on public school students. . . . [But] it . . . knows almost nothing about children who are educated at home. (Nov. 15)

Lack of evidence is only evidence that there is a lack of evidence. There is no evidence of widespread cannibalism among Akron, Ohio residents; should the government fund a massive study to learn why there is no evidence? No, the government should channel its money to study problems for which we have evidence.

This line of reasoning tempts us to lose perspective. We imagine all the horrible possibilities of what homeschoolers could be doing behind closed doors, but we forget that we have absolutely no evidence for this – we only have a lack of evidence. Paranoia is an irrational fear of the unknown.



A reporter commits the fallacy of *proof by lack of evidence* when he suggests that something is true simply because there was no evidence to the contrary. A lack of evidence cannot be used to support or refute anything. The reporter has the *burden of proof* to supply positive evidence to support his claim.

School superintendents and other child professionals say an unknown number of children receive an inadequate education at home. . . . (Nov. 15)

An unknown number may be a million or zero. We don’t know. We could say an unknown number of newspaper reporters were smoking an unknown substance when they wrote this article.

Throughout these articles, Oplinger and Willard weave together the proof by lack of evidence fallacy with another manipulative technique called *innuendo*.

**Fallacy 4: Innuendo**

In Texas, a librarian told the *Beacon Journal* that some home-schooling parents objected to the book selection on the shelves. They lobbied the library to bring back older editions – books that depicted the United States in the 1950s, prior to the landmark 1964 civil rights legislation. . . .

That idea is espoused on a number of racist Internet sites. . . . (Nov. 16)

Notice how Oplinger and Willard never explicitly claim that these homeschoolers are racist. They would need evidence to support this accusation. They only insinuate. *Innuendo* is a propaganda technique that uses subtle and misleading language to manipulate our minds.

Racist and extremist home schoolers are almost invisible until an event thrusts them into the public’s consciousness. . . . In 1994, Gordon Winrod, an avowed anti-Semite and racist, kidnapped his eight grandchildren from their home in North Dakota and took them to a remote area in Missouri for six years and home-schooled them. . . . (Nov. 16)

To conclude that Winrod homeschooled these children simply because he did not send them to school clearly is a misrepresentation of homeschooling. Winrod kidnapped these children. Do all kidnappers homeschool their victims? By referring to kidnapping in an article about homeschooling, Oplinger and Willard suggest that this kind of behavior might characterize homeschoolers.

A tour of the Patrick Henry campus [a college connected with HSLDA] offers an impression of little or no racial diversity. . . .

On the college’s apparent lack of racial diversity, [a representative of the college] said that’s not important to the organization. . . .

The only African-American visible on a busy day early in the 2003-04 school year was a kitchen worker. (Nov. 17)

Oplinger and Willard never directly say that Patrick Henry College is racist, but they imply this with their strategically truncated quotes and observations.

**Warning to Reporters**

This attack on homeschoolers has provided us with an exhilarating supply of material to teach logic. It made our day.

Oplinger and Willard may have mentioned our book to hint that homeschoolers don’t use logic. But as we read their articles, we found that these reporters demonstrated a remarkable ignorance of logic. They should have read our book. It might have saved them the time it took to write those articles. But we’re happy for the opportunity to teach some logic.

**Links**

If you haven’t read these newspaper articles, search the [*Akron Beacon Journal*](http://www.ohio.com/archives) for these articles:

* 11-14-2004 – Home schoolers' motivations are diverse; their teaching styles vary
* 11-15-2004 – Claims of academic success rely on anecdotes, flawed data analysis
* 11-16-2004 – Parents want to control influences; critics see need for wide exposure
* 11-16-2004 – Socialization study inaccurately promoted, researcher says
* 11-16-2004 – Racists can use home schools to train youths
* 11-16-2004 – Some fringe groups use home-schooling
* 11-16-2004 – UP FOR DEBATE
* 11-16-2004 – Related links to home school information
* 11-17-2004 – Home schoolers may be no safer in their homes than other children
* 11-17-2004 – Common elements
* 11-17-2004 – Up for Debate: Troubling situations
* 11-18-2004 – Home-schooling freedoms help parents who abduct children
* 11-18-2004 – Unregistered students in Ohio
* 11-18-2004 – Up for Debate: Tracking missing kids
* 11-18-2004 – UP FOR DEBATE
* 11-18-2004 – Tails of missing-child cases
* 11-18-2004 – The Home School Legal Defense Association
* 11-18-2004 – Cartoon
* 11-19-2004 – Power center driven by religion to reshape nation
* 11-19-2004 – A diverse but united national network mobilizes against regulations at all levels
* 11-20-2004 – Parents assert rights
* 11-20-2004 – Home-schooling purists spurn growing online charter schools
* 11-20-2004 – Up for Debate: Balancing rights
* 11-20-2004 – Home schooling series recap

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