

Bennett's Role in Promoting Public E-Schools Undermines Homeschooling

William Bennett is known as a conservative, former U. S. Secretary of Education under Reagan, and editor of books such as *The Book of Virtues*. In the past, a significant number of homeschoolers may have appreciated Bennett's position on some issues. However, it is important to understand that in his role as a key developer and promoter of public e-schools, Bennett is acting in ways that disregard our interests as homeschoolers and undermine our homeschooling freedoms.

It is important to see Bennett's actions in the context of Michael Milken's Knowledge Universe (KU). Milken is the former "junk bond king" who made as much as \$500 million annually while dealing in junk bonds, according to [www.Forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com) for September, 2001 at <http://www.forbes.com/asap/2001/0910/064.html>. (*Forbes* is a well regarded business magazine.) Milken was then convicted of felony and served time in prison. His latest venture, KU, is a huge enterprise based on providing e-learning via the Internet from cradle to grave, that is, for preschoolers through 12th graders, career counseling, job training, and even retired people. As of September, 2001, KU consisted of nearly 50 companies, many of them interlocked, and was worth an estimated \$1.75 billion. (For more details, see the *Forbes* article cited above.)

Thus, while Bennett is chairman of K12 Inc., he doesn't own it, and it wasn't his idea. According to an article from *Business Week Online* posted on Bennett's web site, Milken and Ron Packard (now the CEO for K12 Inc.) approached Bennett and asked him to chair a company they were organizing that has become K12 Inc. Bennett agreed, even though he had written in 1999 in *The Educated Child* (a book he co-authored with John T. E. Cribb and Chester E. Finn) that there is "no good evidence that most uses of computers significantly improve learning." Milken provided \$10 million to get K12 Inc. launched. Thus, Bennett is the chief spokesperson for a campaign to establish public e-schools run by K12 Inc. in several states, including WI. According to the K12 Inc. web site, in August of this year alone, Bennett was scheduled to make 16 personal appearances at events to promote public e-schools partnered with K12 Inc. in California, Idaho, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. (K12 Inc. scheduled 74 promotional events during August in those 4 states, an indication of how aggressive their marketing campaign is.)

Offering the K12 Inc. curriculum through charter schools means promot-

ers can collect tax money rather than having to convince parents to pay for the program themselves. Thus they can charge more money (often more than \$5,000 per student per year) than most parents could afford to pay.

Homeschoolers are a key to this whole enterprise. Milken and Bennett are building on the success of homeschooling where parents who are not certified teachers have been very effective in educating their own children in their homes. Homeschooled children are well socialized despite their lack of experience in a conventional classroom. (Note: Many homeschoolers would say it is BECAUSE OF this lack of experience.) Thousands of grown homeschoolers are now successful adults, employees, and college students. Without evidence provided by the success of the modern homeschooling movement, Milken, Bennett, and others would be having a much more difficult time launching their enterprise and convincing investors and potential participants that it is a reasonable idea.

In pursuing the K12 Inc. public e-school initiative, Bennett and the K12 Inc. organization have disregarded homeschoolers' concerns and have refused to take seriously how public e-schools will affect us homeschoolers and our homeschooling freedoms. In marketing public e-schools, K12 Inc. has targeted homeschoolers by using lists of homeschoolers' names and repeatedly and aggressively contacting many of us through direct mail, phone, and the Internet.

Bennet and the K12 Inc. organization have argued that parents need a range of choices, and public e-schools are just another choice. However, the basic difference between supporters of public e-schools and the vast majority of homeschoolers is that public e-schoolers view parental choice as a matter of where public education occurs and homeschoolers view choice in terms of parents deciding what children will be taught and taking responsibility for that directly. We won't have that choice and won't be able to take responsibility directly if public e-schools become known as homeschools because there will be enormous pressure for the regulations that public e-schools are under because they are public schools to be applied to homeschools.

The major differences between Bennett's goals and those of most homeschoolers can be seen clearly in Bennett's comments during an interview by Mark Standriff on WSPD radio in Toledo, Ohio, August 16, 2002.

Standriff: And certainly here in the state of Ohio the issue of school choice has come up. What kind of opposition have you folks found?

Bennett: We found opposition from both sides of the political spectrum. Some the homeschooling people have opposed us.

Standriff: O really, I would think this would be right in line with their thinking.

Bennett: Well it should be. Frankly, I'm disappointed. I've been defending homeschoolers for twenty years. But the principle I'm defending, Mark, is school choice, parental choice. The objection they have is that it shouldn't be involved in public funding, at all. It shouldn't be involved with government schools, as they say. But, I'm not prepared to relinquish \$400 billion and just say, well never mind, this is not money that I'm entitled to. Parents are paying that money in taxes, they should have an option within the public school system that gives them a chance to educate their children at home, but be publicly accountable as all public schools should be.

Clearly, Bennett disagrees with most homeschooling parents about the importance of being independent of public schools. As homeschoolers we want to maintain responsibility for our children's education, not turn it over to the state. We want something different from what public schools offer and from the very limited curriculums public e-schools offer.

The \$400 billion Bennett refers to is the estimated amount American taxpayers spend on public schools each year. To be sure \$400 billion is a lot of money. But we homeschoolers realize that if we take money from the state, we will lose our homeschooling freedoms. And Bennett doesn't even acknowledge that public e-schools undermine homeschooling freedoms.

While a significant number of homeschoolers may have appreciated Bennett's position on some issues, clearly he is now using his reputation within the homeschooling community to gain a foothold on using public money to educate children in their homes. Therefore, we homeschoolers need to let other homeschoolers and the general public know that Bennett's commitment to using public money in this way runs counter to what most homeschoolers want and would undermine the very nature of homeschooling as we know it. (See the article on page 3 of this newsletter.) v