

U.S. Christians rally around home-schooling family facing deportation

by [Krista Kapralos](#)

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(RNS) When Uwe and Hannelore Romeike's asylum case is argued Tuesday (April 23) before a panel of federal judges, their lawyers won't talk about poverty, war, or any of the reasons most immigrants cite in their bid to stay in the U.S.

Instead, they'll focus on a parent's right to teach their children at home, which isn't allowed in the Romeikes' native Germany. There, home-schooling families face fines, jail time and even loss of custody if their children are not enrolled in a traditional school.

The Romeikes' lawyers will also talk about their right to teach the Bible during the school day -- an angle that has spurred more than 100,000 U.S. conservatives to sign a petition to let the family stay in Tennessee, where they've made their home since 2008.

"In Germany there is basically religious freedom, but it ends at least with teaching the children," Uwe Romeike says in a video produced by the Home School Legal Defense Association, the Christian organization providing the family's legal support.

Home-schooling families in Europe have become a cause celebre for some U.S. conservatives. The Arizona-based Alliance Defending Freedom is working with two Swedish home-schooling families, including Christer and Annie Johansson, who lost custody of 11-year-old Domenic when they refused to enroll him in public school.

The Romeike case is unusual in a system backlogged with people trying to escape violence and persecution. The Romeikes are comparatively well off, and come from a country that hosts more than twice as many refugees as the U.S.

But because they home-schooled their five children (a sixth was born in Tennessee), they faced high fines and tension with local authorities. At one point, police forcibly corralled the oldest children into a van and delivered them to school.

"That is persecution," said Mike Donnelly, a lawyer with the Home School Legal Defense Association.

In a Board of Immigration Appeals decision last year, lawyers arguing for the U.S. Department of Justice said the family wasn't targeted because of their faith -- any parent who doesn't enroll a child in school faces the same consequences.

"By mandatory schooling we try to ensure extremely high standards of learning for all of our children," said Stefan Messerer, a spokesman at the German embassy in Washington.

Uwe Romeike said in 2010 that his family only started using the religious freedom argument when they applied for asylum. The primary reason his family home-schools, he said, is to avoid bullying.

Talk show host Glenn Beck pledged \$50,000 to support the family, and warned last month that the case is a bellwether for religious liberty.

"When America says you don't have the fundamental right to raise your children up to the Lord as the way you see fit ... we are no longer Americans," he said.

Most Germans who home-school, many of whom are Christians, do so in secret. It's estimated that hundreds or thousands of German children are home-schooled, according to interviews with advocates and lawyers.

"There are new cases cropping up all the time," said Jurgen Dudek, a Christian home-schooling father of eight. His family, one of just a few that is open about home schooling, faces a near-constant cycle of fines and court appearances.

Dudek spoke last week at a homeschooling conference in Minnesota, and plans to attend the Romeikes' hearing. Even if the Romeikes win, he said, his family will remain in Germany.

"We wouldn't want (the German government) to be triumphant in ousting the Dudek family," he said.