

WESTERN PA. home SCHOOLERS

A Network for Sharing Local Information about Homeschooling - Winter 1985 - Newsletter #7
- Editor: Susan Richman - #11

Our Western PA Homeschooler's Network is three years old with this issue of our newsletter! Three years of growing from very simple beginnings to our present network of over 200 families encouraging and supporting each other. Many strong friendships have grown over these years, all of us feeling a special bond with others who've made the decision to teach their own children. We come from many different backgrounds, a wide spectrum of religious belief, formal educational backgrounds, job and life experiences, and our diversity is a great strength.

Those who've talked with me, or read this newsletter for a while, know I've always been very optimistic about the homeschooling climate in PA. I have always encouraged parents to seek cooperative agreements with their districts once their children are compulsory school age (age 8, if a child has never been enrolled in school). I've felt Section 1327 of the PA School Code gave us enough of an "in", enough of a right, and, after all, so many families have been able to work out fine agreements. My thinking has been changing now, and as you will see in upcoming pages of this issue, we are now urging all homeschooling parents to band together to seek a law change in PA. Partly my change of mind comes from the disheartening news of parents dealing with very difficult districts, partly from the new PSEA (NEA) motion to work to change section 1327 in their favor, and partly from the very good success so many other states have had in introducing and passing clear, positive new homeschooling legislation. Also, our network and numbers have grown significantly enough across the state that I feel we could truly make a good show of support for a change. We hope you will give a very serious reading to our draft proposal, and let us know what you think of it, and how you will be able to help in the work of the legislative campaign. - Susan Richman, Editor

SCHOOLS DISTRICT COOPERATING WITH HOMESCHOOLING FAMILIES IN WESTERN PA:

ALIQUIPPA
ALTOONA
ARMSTRONG
BEAVER
CONNEAUT LAKE
CRAWFORD CENTRAL
CRESSON
FAIRVIEW
FOX CHAPEL
HIGHLANDS
KANE
KISKI
MILL CREEK
MT. LEBANON
MT. UNION
NORTH ALLEGHENY
NORTH HILLS
PENN CREST
PITTSBURGH
QUAKER VALLEY
REDBANK VALLEY
SHALER
SOUTH BUTLER
SOUTH WEST BUTLER
SLIPPERY ROCK
TITUSVILLE
TRINITY
WEST JEFFERSON HILLS
WOODLAND HILLS
YOUGH

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Western PA Homeschooler's
Masterhead letter by
Jesse Richman (7).

Some of these school districts have been exceptionally cooperative and even encouraging to families, while others are allowing families to homeschool only under very restrictive conditions that some families would find intolerable. Some districts have set up "Policies" modeled on a set of sample policies sent to them by Douglas Boelhouwer in Harrisburg, Dept. of ED. These policies often contain unnecessarily nasty language such as, "The school district will not grant 'credit' for courses completed at home and will neither 'promote', 'advance', nor 'graduate' students who complete a series of courses through in-home instruction" (this statement after they had enumerated VERY specific monitoring and evaluation and curriculum requirements-- as one parent said to me, what exactly is the point of all this close scrutiny if not to 'grant credit?'). Most have an arbitrary requirement of parent qualification (pass NTE Exam, be certified teacher, have college degree, etc.). It is almost a matter of "policy making by xerox machine", and these policies are becoming sort of a "common law" by being repeated so many times without thought. Indeed, when I've asked several superintendents what they meant by specific points in their "terms of agreement", they almost invariably mumble that, well, frankly they're not sure, but it was in the packet or policies they received in the mail. Some parents are finding that the superintendents behind these policies are sensible, and ready to be more cooperative than their copied policy seems to indicate. Others seem to think that once they've "formally adopted" a particular policy (that is, xeroxed someone else's and taped on their own letterhead), that it is carved in stone, inflexible, the LAW. It is important for parents to remember that there is NOTHING in the PA School Code that even remotely resembles these policies. Some superintendents come up with the argument that by law their own hired teachers must be certified, must submit weekly lesson plans or submit to frequent unannounced monitoring, use a proscribed curriculum, texts, and timetable, and so they are rightly just asking us to simply do the same thing as any other teacher in their district. Perhaps we need to now remind these superintendents that we are certainly NOT asking to be paid for our work with our own children, and that therefore such requirements and "logical" arguments cannot be made. To their great credit, at least one district, Conneaut Lake, invited all homeschooling families to an open work session of their school board, so that all could have a chance to speak and give their views on the proposed policy. After much parent input, the original very rigid policy has been amended to allow some leeway and flexibility.

LEGISLATIVE CAMPAIGN From Howard Richman

There is both trouble and opportunity brewing in Pennsylvania with regard to the state law. First the trouble:

I am a public school teacher. In January, I got my biweekly issue of the PSEA (Pennsylvania State Education Association) newsletter and I found that the December, 1984, meeting of the teacher's union's house of delegates passed a motion that PSEA would support changes in the school code to require "in-home instruction" be taught by certified teachers. The effect would be to prevent parents, unless they were certified teachers, from teaching their own children. I promptly wrote to the editor of the PSEA newsletter expressing my dismay. It seems that we are going to have to work together to keep the rug from being pulled out from under us. Now for the opportunity:

There are about 500 home-schooling families in Pennsylvania. Perhaps now is the time to make a fundamental change in the state law to take home-schoolers out of the "private tutors" option altogether and make a special exemption to the compulsory education law for parents who want to teach their own children. A lot of other states have specifically made home-schooling legal, including Arizona, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nevada, Virginia and Wisconsin. Maybe we can do the same.

The present law leaves too much to the discretion of the school superintendent. It states that the compulsory school attendance requirement can be satisfied by a "properly qualified private tutor...if such instruction is satisfactory to the proper district superintendent of schools." Some school superintendents have permitted all serious parents to homeschool, while others have placed many roadblocks in the way of homeschoolers. The present law permits superintendents to require whatever they wish in the way of curriculum. Some superintendents even force parents to use the school's textbooks and curriculum. As a result there are a number of court cases pending in Pennsylvania of parents who have taught their own children without permission from the district superintendent.

This past month I have drawn up a preliminary draft of home-schooling legislation which is included in this newsletter. It borrows heavily upon a legislative draft proposed by John Holt, and upon new state laws which have made home-schooling explicitly legal in other states. Both my wife, Susan, editor of this newsletter, and Peter Bergson, editor of PENCIL, an Eastern Pennsylvania home-schooling newsletter, have talked with their state representatives, and have been received favorably. Both Representatives happen to be on the education committee of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. It is likely that either Republican Representative Freind of Delaware County or Democrat Representative Livengood of Armstrong County will soon introduce a revised version of this draft in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives. If such legislation were passed, we would no longer have to worry that changes in the private tutoring option would eliminate home-schooling. Furthermore, the new law would specifically make correspondence schools an alternative to public schools and specifically protect the religious freedom of parents not to include curriculum topics which are in conflict with their religious doctrines. This legislation would make it easier for us to homeschool in our own ways, and would prevent anyone from pulling the rug out from under those of us who do not have teaching certificates.

There are perhaps five hundred families teaching their own children in the state of Pennsylvania. We do not have very much political clout. We cannot elect or defeat legislators. However, we can be persuasive. If we all can get active behind this legislative proposal, and we all call and personally visit our representatives, we can have an impact much greater than our numbers.

When you visit your state representative and state senator, the most important thing is to let them know that there are people concerned with home-schooling laws in their districts. You can take them any articles about home-schooling that have appeared in the paper. Feel free to take them our legislative proposal and to tell them that something similar may soon be introduced in the legislature. You might let them know that other states have enacted laws which specifically permit parents to teach their own children. If you have had difficulties with dealing with your superintendent you might describe those difficulties to your legislator, for, after all, these people are in the problem-solving business. Sometimes you may find that they don't know anything about home-schooling. You may have to let them know what home-schooling is, and why people choose to teach their own children. In Wisconsin where a very good home-schooling law was recently passed, some home-schooling families even invited their representatives to their homes in order to show them what home-schooling is like.

Please drop us a note after you have visited your legislators. Let us know how they reacted. Meanwhile, when the bill comes before the committee, or on the floor, we'll want to have a phone-tree set up so that you can re-contact your legislators and urge them to vote for specific legislation.

If we all get involved, we may be able to get home-schooling made specifically legal in Pennsylvania. If not, parents who are not certified could lose their cooperative agreements with their school districts.