

WESTERN PA. HOME SCHOOLERS

A Network for sharing Local Information about Homeschooling

Editors: Susan & Howard Richman

Spring 1986 Newsletter ①6

Here's a quick run-down for new folks about how the present law works in PA right now (Note that it's not working very WELL in many places, which is why we're all working hard to change things with House Bill 1478... more on that on page 3).

First-- Compulsory school age in PA is only between ages 8 and 17. I often call this the best kept secret in PA education. This means that you DO NOT have to let any school officials know anything about your child before your child turns 8. No "truant officer" will come knocking to see why your child isn't in school if he is younger than 8. Some parents choose to notify the school superintendent of their homeschooling work before the child is 8, but this just a matter of being polite on the parents' part, showing goodwill, not a matter of necessity or law. Do note, though, that if your child has already been enrolled in school, then that entry age is his compulsory school age. Some districts even insist that kindergarten enrollment shifts the child's compulsory school age status (this is one point that the Brittons of West Mifflin, PA are fighting in their court case). Some districts are using the nasty tactic of telling parents that UNLESS they make a formal agreement with the district before the child turns 8, that the child will be considered a first grader if the parents decide to enroll him in school at age 8. One district went so far as to vote that ONLY children in kindergarten through 3rd grade were allowed to be homeschooled-- AND that parents of those young children had to be certified and go along with all sorts of evaluation procedures.

Second-- As things currently stand, parents need to get approval from the local public school superintendent in order to legally teach their own child, once the child turns 8. As John Holt was so fond of saying, this is rather like having to ask General Motors for permission to buy a Toyota. The school people have a vested interest in having children attend the public schools, and often feel VERY uncomfortable having to come out and say it's OK for you to teach your kids yourself. Most districts have now come up with official policies, voted on by their school boards, that set the specific district guidelines for handling home-education requests. Don't flip out when you first see this "policy"--- I guarantee you it will seem full of all sorts of nasty language that seems totally uncalled for. Rest assured that your district, first of all, did NOT think this policy up on it's own, but have merely done a paste-up-xerox job with another district's home education policy. Often the school officials are as surprised as the parents to find what is really in the policy. The most important point in the district's policy is their statement on what qualifications the "private tutor" needs to have. Some few terrible districts insist that parents MUST be certified in every subject area that they will teach-- right down to Phys Ed.-- and will take anyone to court who doesn't match that. Others say the parent must have a college degree, in any field. Others say two years of college. Others say a parent with a high school diploma is OK, if the child is enrolled in a "professionally prepared correspondence program". Others simply don't mention the area of tutor qualifications, but give indication that the superintendent can deny any request if he feels that the "intellectual, physical, emotional, and social needs of the child" are not being met by the proposed program. Some districts simply have more frequent evaluation requirements for parents that do not have "official" looking qualifications.

Do let us know what your school district's official policy is, and how strictly they enforce it. We keep copies of school district policies on file, and these often help new folks in knowing what to expect from a particular district, or even help families decide where to move to. Examples of the terrible, often ridiculous, disparity in district policies is good ammunition in trying to show legislators that a change needs to be made.

If any of you have had good experiences lately in securing approval for homeschooling, do write to share what the procedure was like. What was it like to meet a superintendent, what did you prepare in advance of the meeting, what requirements did they make that you felt were unreasonable-- or reasonable. (Two districts have made the very UNreasonable demand that the students MUST attend the public school for phys.ed. and music class!). Lots of families will be approaching their districts this fall, and they will be helped by all the sharing you can do. Thanks! Susan Richman,

SCHOOL DISTRICTS COOPERATING WITH HOMESCHOOLING FAMILIES IN WESTERN PA.

ALTOONA
APOLLO-RIDGE
ARMSTRONG
BEAVER
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BUTLER
CONNEAUT LAKE
CRAWFORD CENTRAL
CRESSON
FAIRVIEW
FOX CHAPEL
FRANKLIN REGIONAL
GIRARD
HIGHLANDS
JEFFERSON-MORGAN
HOPEWELL

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NORTH HILLS
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PITTSBURGH
QUAKER VALLEY
REDBANK VALLEY
RINGGOLD
SHALER
SOUTH BUTLER
SOUTH WEST BUTLER
SLIPPERY ROCK
TRINITY
WEST JEFFERSON HILLS
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Western PA Homeschooler's masthead lettered by Jesse Richman, (B).

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UPDATE ON THE LEGAL SITUATION

...from Howard Richman

NEW HOME-SCHOOLING REGULATIONS. We have been watching the Pennsylvania Bulletin for several months to see what the new regulations being proposed by the State Board of Education would be like. On April 12th they were finally published. Now there is a thirty day public comment period during which the regulations can be changed. Parent Educators of Pennsylvania is trying its hardest to get those regulations changed during this period. The main part we don't like is in section 11.31 part b. The beginning of this section reads, "The superintendent's approval of the tutor shall be by acceptable evidence of the tutor's ability to teach the program to the pupil..."

These regulations won't prevent superintendents from deciding that teacher certification or college education is the only "acceptable evidence". Indeed many superintendents already have been holding that parents must have certification in order to be properly qualified to teach their own children. We would like the regulations to specify that "acceptable evidence" need not be limited to teacher certification or college education.

Some other aspects of the regulations are also annoying. For example, they don't reimburse school districts for programs offered to home-schooled students but they do reimburse districts for home-schooled children whose parents are being prosecuted.

We have three chances to change these regulations. The House Education Committee can force them to be changed, the Senate Education committee can force them to be changed, and the Independent Regulatory Review Commission can change them. Tom Eldredge and I have each written to all the members of the Education Committees asking them to exercise their power to change the regulations. The Independent Regulatory Review Commission will meet on May 7th and we plan to testify and pack the audience.

Legislative Breakfast On May 7th we are having our second legislative breakfast. I am writing this nine days before the breakfast and so far things look pretty good. A lot of Senators and Representatives have said that they will attend and a lot of home-schoolers have contributed time and effort to make it a success. As of this writing, it looks like we will not have received enough money to cover all the peripheral expenses. If you haven't already contributed, please send me \$10.

HB 1478 is not dead. The long delayed hearings on HB 1478 (the home-education bill) have still not been scheduled. They will probably occur in August which will be too late to help us this year. However, if a home-education bill has not passed by then, the hearings could help us in our future efforts.

There are two ways that a bill may be passed -- either by going through the proper committees in the House and Senate, or by being added on to another bill as an amendment. When a bill is added on to another bill as an amendment the bill it is added to is called a "vehicle" and the bill that is added is called a "rider". Usually the "vehicle" has already gone through the committees in the House and Senate and so a "rider" moves very quickly. This year many Home education bills are waiting for the Senate to pass them. We will be asking the Senators to attach our bill to one of those bills. If the Senate will do so, the bill will come right back to the House

for a quick vote on whether to accept the "vehicle" as amended. We think that we have enough votes in the House to win that sort of vote but we don't yet have the votes in the Senate.

Amendment to HB 1478. You probably have heard about the change we are making in our home-schooling bill. A good home-schooling law in Louisiana that does not require any evaluation measures of home-schoolers has been corrupted by the Louisiana Dept. of Education. Now, whenever home-schoolers send in affidavits that their children are being taught at home the Department sends the affidavits back if they are not accompanied by achievement test scores. Our bill, as changed, specifies that parents have the choice of how to document that education is taking place in their home-education program. If they want to, they can use achievement tests. Alternatively they can have their children evaluated by teachers or psychologists, or keep a portfolio of their children's work including a daily log of activities. If you would like to see the latest version of this amendment please write me and I will send it right out.

Court Cases. None of the court cases mentioned in the last newsletter have been resolved, however there are two new cases: the Zaparaches in Beaver County and the Erwins in Indiana County.

What You Can Do. Work on your Senator!

1. Call the home-schooler who is serving as a legislative contact in your county and ask what you can do to help.
2. If you have an older home-schooling child have him interview your Senator. Jesse interviewed our Representative. Before he went in, he made up a list of questions to ask: "Was your family always interested in politics?", "Did you support the bill to make the firefly the state bug?", etc... Jesse brought a tape recorder with him to record our Representative's answers. Susan stayed in the waiting room while Jesse went in and conducted the interview. Rep. Livengood was charmed.
3. Invite your Senator to your home to see home-schooling in action.
4. When you meet with your Senator, bring him some examples of what your children do at home.

Many Senators will express concern that we are ignoring the State's interest that our children receive an education. You can point out to your Senator that the home-schoolers across the state have agreed to support an amendment to our bill which has parents keep documentation that education is taking place in the home, and that we also specify a procedure through which the Department of Education would investigate a complaint from a named informant that education is not taking place in our homes. You can also suggest that your Senator call Representative Pitts if he has any question about this amendment to our bill.

One other thing to keep in mind is to ask your Senator not only to support HB 1478, but also to support "any other bill or amendment which would provide for home-education". This is a code-phrase which your Senator will understand. It asks him to commit himself to supporting HB 1478 in whatever form it comes up.

Please work hard on your Senator. We only need 26 supportive Senators to get a good home-schooling law passed in Pennsylvania.