

PENNSYLVANIA HOMESCHOOLERS

A STATEWIDE NETWORK FOR SHARING INFORMATION ABOUT HOME EDUCATION

EARLY WINTER ISSUE--#53

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Homeschoolers Wow Harrisburg!

from Howard Richman

On September 19, PA Homeschoolers sponsored Homeschool Excellence Day at the State Capitol in order to educate legislators about how well homeschoolers were doing. Events that day included a legislative breakfast where homeschool students and graduates spoke to legislators, a meeting of homeschoolers to discuss problems occurring, a science, social studies, art, and creative writing fair to display student work, and a press conference.

It had been a long time since homeschoolers in Pennsylvania sponsored a legislative breakfast. The last time was back in 1989 shortly after passage of the home education law. Most of the homeschooled students who spoke then and impressed the legislators were just elementary school age — the long-term homeschoolers hadn't grown up yet. Now, six years later, there are many new legislators and a new governor. It was time to re-acquaint ourselves with our lawmakers and let them see how our children were turning out.

The breakfast took place at the Ramada Inn on Market Square, just a few blocks from the Capitol complex. At the breakfast there were 152 homeschool adults, 111 children and 47 legislators. While people were eating, I presented a statistical profile of homeschooling in Pennsylvania. I pointed out that homeschooling is growing, homeschoolers are doing well on such measures as achievement tests, though we don't spend as much time in formal instruction, and that the homeschooling community is taking care of its own through homeschooling parents who are evaluators and through diploma accreditation agencies coming out of the homeschooling community to

make sure our graduates are prepared to do well in the world. I also told of the studies of homeschooled graduates which are showing that about half are going to college and an astounding 2/3 are becoming self-employed.

Then five long-term homeschool students and graduates made these statistics real in their five minute talks. Their poise and articulateness perhaps showed off homeschooling even more than the important things that they had to say. Although legislators are known for walking in and out of meetings, hardly any left while the students spoke — this was something new and different.

Our first two speakers, Grace Eldredge and Ben Beachy, illustrated two sides of homeschool graduates: those who enter the world of work right after graduation and those who are bound for college. Grace Eldredge, a PA Homeschoolers graduate of two years ago, told of how she had been prepared for self-employment during homeschooling. She pointed out how being in charge of her own schedule through a check-list daily log as a homeschooled student [Note: An example of her 8th grade check list appears on page 10 of our *Guide to PA Homeschool Law*] helped her learn how to budget her time so she would have time for her activities of choice, such as sewing. After graduation she established a successful sewing business which she later sold. She also told how her younger brothers had been established in small-engine repair and baking businesses and that she was now joining family members as they extended the baking business into a health food store. Perhaps homeschoolers like Grace establish-

ing businesses will lead to a revitalization of the American economy.

Ben Beachy, one of five PA Homeschoolers National Merit Semi-finalists this year, told how his flexible program of homeschooling has been preparing him for college. While 1-of-200 high school seniors nationally scores high enough on the PSAT test to become a National Merit Scholar, the figure is much closer to 1-in-25 in the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Diploma Program. He told how he got interested in electronics after his father taught him some basic electronics and how he had gone on to build almost every item from a Radio Shack kit, from buzzers to radios, and tried to put together his own computer, which "didn't quite work." Once he got a Macintosh computer, he worked hard to master it and even established his own consulting business. Ben not only represented the many homeschoolers who are excelling academically, but as a Mennonite (from Telford in Montgomery County), he also showed that religious families can have very strong science programs.

Our third speaker, eleventh grader Patricia Hill, told about her experience as a volunteer teacher's aid at a school for exceptional children. She spoke about how she had worked hard so that the children who do not take well to sudden changes in their environment would come to accept her. The patience, love and understanding that she brought with her to her volunteer work shone through in her talk. We could see how homeschoolers were contributing to their communities and would do so as adults.

Our fourth speaker, African-American ninth grader Jason Wilson, told about how his

interest in aviation had arisen out of his nurturing home. He told how from a young age his parents taught him to read and how he became an avid reader. His interest in history and World War II led to his interest in aviation, and his interest in aviation had been encouraged with several opportunities to actually fly air planes and gliders. His humor brought laughs from the appreciative audience when he pointed out that maybe one reason that the glider pilot let him land the plane was because the glider practically flew itself anyway. Jason Wilson was yet another example of an excellent and flexible program of homeschooling in action.

Our last speaker, Rebecca Snider, a Pennsylvania Homeschoolers graduate of 1995, told about her interest in politics and her plans to go to college and major in government. When introducing her I pointed out her interest in government and her past effectiveness as a lobbyist for homeschooling. Her topic was, "Keeping the Vision: Our Moral Responsibility" and she pointed to the responsibility of Christians to be politically active and to make a difference in the world about them. She pointed out that the stereotype of Generation X as only being concerned about themselves did not apply to her. The legislators were interested to hear from a homeschooler who would probably someday be making a difference in their own arena.

In general my talk and the talks by the students let many legislators know that homeschoolers in Pennsylvania are succeeding very well, that our students are starting to grow up now, and that they are going to make a difference in the world.

Meeting After Breakfast

Homeschoolers Decide NOT to Go for Law Change

The 263 homeschoolers who attended the legislative breakfast were willing to take time out of busy schedules to come to Harrisburg to educate their legislators. They are the same people who would be the bulwark of any legislative effort for further homeschool rights. All of the support groups in the PA Homeschoolers network for whom we had addresses had been invited to send a member so that they would be represented at the breakfast and at the meeting that would follow for discussing problems that were occurring. The resulting group was pretty evenly distributed throughout Pennsylvania. The purpose of the meeting (as we announced in the last issue of this newsletter and a letter sent to support group leaders across the state) was to "discuss any problems that are occurring under PA Home Education Law." In our letter to support groups we noted:

Now that Republicans are in control in Harrisburg, we might be able to

get support for legislation that could remedy such problems. The meeting will be the chance for us to put our heads together and see if anything needs to be done.

The agenda was wide open: (1) discuss problems occurring, (2) discuss possible solutions, and (3) formulate a plan of action. I chaired the meeting and, as has been my practice in all such meetings, the microphone was open to everyone who wanted to speak. In addition frequent shows of hands were taken in order to get the sense of the meeting.

Although prior to the meeting several people, including myself and Dee Black (Home School Legal Defense Association), had been talking up the possibility of putting together a bill to make improvements upon the homeschooling law, a decision was made to solve the problems that were occurring through local action by the support groups and through contacts with the Department of Education.

Problems Occurring:

During the first part of the meeting five people (Laurie Koch, Dave Horner, Susan Rosano, Susan Richman, and Dee Black of the Home School Legal Defense Association) spoke about problems that were occurring ranging from school district misinformation to new homeschoolers, problems with extra-curricular activities, overly complex qualifications of evaluators, and varying interpretations of the law. Everyone who wanted to come forward and speak did so.

Possible Solutions:

During the second part of the meeting we discussed possible solutions. The first solution to be considered was the possibility of a bill adjusting the law. However, after hearing cautionary comments by Karen Boyd, Tom Eldredge, Gary Lande, and Patricia Moon, such a solution was rejected unanimously in a show of hands. Especially telling was Patricia Moon's information that the state teacher's union had gotten wind that we might open up the homeschool law, and that the PSEA was making plans to pounce on the law with their own changes. Tom Eldredge was especially eloquent with his wisdom born of hard lobbying for the current home education law in the 1980's when we twice saw our bill changed in committee at the behest of our opponents. The consensus at the meeting was clear: The problems that are currently occurring are not at all major enough to warrant opening up the law at this time.

Instead, two solutions were proposed and accepted by the group: (1) proactive-action by support groups, and (2) improved contacts with the Department of Education.

Action Plan:

Two committees were formed to pursue these solutions and those at the meeting signed up with the committee heads if they wanted to be

on each committee. Bill Fay, a leader of CHAP, has agreed that these committees will be given meeting time and space at the state-wide curriculum fair at the Harrisburg Farm Show Arena next May.

Proactive-Action Committee. This committee was formed to provide leadership so that support groups would engage in more proactive activities to help new homeschoolers learn about the law from the homeschooling community instead of through misrepresentation by school districts. Patricia Moon (phone: 814-383-4325) is in charge of this committee. Please call if you would like to join or learn about their plans. Also, articles about reach-out activities for homeschool support groups will be welcomed for publication in the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.

Since the meeting some support groups have already begun to take proactive measures. For an example, see Edris Wilson's article on page 6 of this newsletter.

Liaison Committee. Much of the recent friction between school districts and homeschoolers has been due to poor leadership in the office that deals with homeschooling questions at the PA Department of Education. Recently, that office had stopped telling school districts that they can't exceed their authority under the home education law and sometimes they even appeared to be encouraging districts to do so.

A homeschool liaison committee to the Department of Education was set up, headed by Susan Richman. That day Susan and I met with the Secretary of Education (while he strolled the rotunda looking at the homeschool projects) and he designated his policy assistant, Greg White, an old friend of homeschooling, as someone that homeschoolers could go to if they had problems with the Department. In November this committee went into action in response to a Department of Education directive to school districts (BEC Circular #8-95) as discussed in the article on page 4.

State Wide Curriculum Fair

After the meeting many people rushed over to the Capitol Rotunda to begin setting up projects for the state-wide Academic Fair, organized by Sue Means and judged by homeschooling parents: The available tables and bulletin boards were filled with projects, and legislators and the Secretary of Education were suitably impressed. Secretary Hickok took a close look at James and Joshua Lentz's miniature battle scenes of Gettysburg and D-Day and shared how he used to build miniature scenes himself as a boy. For an excellent description of the Fair, see Don Underdonk's newspaper article "Homeschoolers Gather at State Capitol" which was published in the *East Shore Shopper* and appears on page 3.