

## Principals Lobby to Tighten Homeschool Law

by Howard Richman

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In early May, the school principals' associations went door to door in Harrisburg visiting representatives and senators asking them to re-open the home education law. Specifically (see the text of their position on page 2) they suggested that for some children the home education law was an "easy way out" and they asked for an examination of the following issues:

- Higher parental qualifications
- Periodic Home visits by school officials
- Review of our curriculum by school officials
- Participation in school activities

The implication of the principals' position is that they would accept a mandate that homeschoolers must be let into school activities, such as school sports, just so long as homeschoolers paid for it with a big slice of their freedom.

### **Background**

Under current law the school boards decide whether or not to give homeschoolers access to their sports. Where homeschoolers have persistently lobbied their school districts they have usually won such access. For example, the last issue of this newsletter featured the successful conclusion of a persistent lobbying campaign by homeschoolers in Easton to get school sports in their school district. When some homeschoolers have been refused school sports access by their school districts, they have turned to their state representatives for help and in response both Democratic and Republican representatives introduced bills in April (HB 1328 & HB 1330) which would mandate that school districts let homeschoolers participate in their activities.

### **Rep. Armstrong Schedules Meeting**

In response to the school principals' lobbying day, Representative Tom Armstrong, one of the four state representatives who will be homeschooling this school year (the others are Sam Rohrer, Joe Petrarca, and Tom Yewcic), scheduled a June 9 meeting of conservative legislators at the state capitol in which he asked homeschoolers to respond to the principals' association. He also asked homeschoolers to present their own suggestions for improvements, if any, in the homeschooling law. Four homeschoolers were invited to attend, Laura Fay and Kim Huber from CHAP (Christian Homeschool Association of Pennsylvania), Susan Richman from PA Homeschoolers, and Deb Bell from the Home School Resource Center.

### **Proposed Change in Law**

My first response to the principals' association was that we should actively oppose the school sports mandate bills and try to keep them from coming up for a vote. However, I didn't think that homeschoolers could be unified in such an attempt since many homeschoolers support those bills.

Then I thought that if we could just get homeschoolers involved legislatively we could fend off attempts to add terrible amendments. So, I tried to put together my own proposed school sports bill which would give homeschoolers both school sports and more freedom. My proposed bill would have given homeschoolers the choice of who they deal with, the public school superintendent (as is presently the case) or a willing non-public school principal. If they continued to deal with the local public school superintendent they could have access to public school sports. If they chose to deal with a non-public school instead, they could have access to the non-public school's sports teams.

I was all set to take the leadership necessary to successfully lobby my proposed law through the legislature. I even scheduled a legislative breakfast (which I have since canceled) to kick off the lobbying effort. I was confident that, if we could keep the homeschooling community united and active, the bill could pass and unfriendly amendments could be defeated. After all, several other states have gradually improved their homeschool laws through additional legislation and, as yet, no state has taken a step backwards.

My first indication that the proposal would fail occurred when several Catholic homeschooling leaders came out against it. While many homeschoolers might have liked the freedom of being able to deal with a non-public school principal instead of the public school superintendent, the Catholic homeschoolers were afraid that their church might require them to deal with a Catholic school principal and that the principal might charge them full tuition or tell them how to homeschool.

### **Rep Armstrong's Meeting**

On June 9, Representative Armstrong's meeting of conservative legislators occurred. About 15 legislators and aids attended as well as homeschoolers and other pro-family advocates. The homeschoolers presented evidence about the success of homeschooling and passed out both national and Pennsylvania studies. Susan also presented my proposal for changing the homeschooling law.

Rep. Birmelin, our stalwart champion in past battles for homeschool freedom, threw cold water on my proposal. He said that he would oppose any bill which mandated that public schools must give homeschoolers access to their sports.

A few days later, the CHAP board of directors met and passed a resolution against changing the home education law at this time. As a result of the negative responses from Rep. Birmelin, the Catholic homeschoolers, and CHAP, I dropped my proposal.

### **What You Can Do**

It is still likely that a school sports bill will eventually come up for a vote and that we will need to respond quickly to unfriendly amendments and defeat the bill altogether if such amendments get attached. There are two things that you can do:

1. Come to Homeschoolers Excellence Day in the state capitol on September 30. See page 29 for the project entry form. Even if you don't bring your own project come and see the excellent projects from homeschoolers across the state. While you're there be sure to visit your legislators. Tell them that you would strongly oppose any bill, including a school sports bill, if it would take away our freedom, and invite them to visit the homeschoolers' project fair downstairs.
2. Get connected with our e-mail phone tree. All people on the e-mail phone tree will be immediately sent an e-mail alert if a school sports bill is about to come up for a vote. If you don't have e-mail, just have one of your friends e-mail us the information and agree to call you if they receive an alert. Support group leaders could make sure that someone in their support group gets the message and then starts the message through the support group phone tree.

If we do not remain vigilant, we may wake up one day to find that we have gained access to public school sports but have lost our freedom. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance.