

Homeschool Organizations Graduate

from Howard Richman

[This article first appeared in Issue 64 (Fall 1998) of the *PA Homeschoolers* newsletter.]

In a new written policy that is now in its next-to-final draft, the Ridge Administration has continued the Casey Administration's recognition of diplomas awarded by homeschool organizations. During the Casey Administration, three homeschool organizations were recognized. Now the Ridge Administration is poised to add several new organizations to the list (which is published at the end of the support group listings in each issue of this newsletter).

What This Policy Will Do:

- It will ditto the Casey Administration's recognition of diplomas awarded by homeschool organizations.
- It will result in the eventual addition of many new homeschool organizations, including Mason Dixon Homeschoolers, to the list of those whose diplomas are recognized.
- It will bind future administrations with a written policy that recognizes the diplomas awarded by homeschool organizations.

How the Policy Was Written

Mary Hudzinski gets the credit for really getting things going.. Her organization, Mason Dixon Homeschoolers, had decided to start a diploma program and had submitted their standards and procedures to the Department of Education (as required during the Casey Administration) but had heard nothing in reply.. So Mary contacted me and her Congressman, Rep. Pat Fleagle. I agreed to help as did her state representative

Rep. Fleagle arranged a quick meeting between us and Secretary of Education Eugene Hickok when Sec. Hickok came to testify before Fleagle's committee. There Sec. Hickok told us that he would instruct Greg White (his policy director) to work something out. Mary and I soon met with Greg White and a succession of draft proposals went back and forth between us and Greg White through the mail.. We involved Terry Johns of Buxmont Christian Educational Institute. and Edi Thomas of Erie County Homeschoolers with reviewing each of our responses before we mailed them.

One of the sticking points was a request by the Department of Education that we require a school official's signature that the home education program of a candidate for graduation was in compliance (and not in due process procedures) with the PA Home Education law. The Department seemed insistent on this point, so I decided to see how it would work in practice with our 1998 graduates. It didn't. I began to hear complaints directly from parents and indirectly from parents through Karen Boyd, a member of our Board of Directors. So I called and wrote Greg White to tell him about the problems. Specifically, in a July 6 letter to him I wrote:

The problem our parents faced when we tried to implement this provision this spring was with obtaining a school district signature on a written verification in time for graduation. While many had no trouble getting a school district official's signature, others were unable. For example, the Pittsburgh School District simply refused to sign the form saying that it is not in the law that they have to do so. Many of the school officials who normally would sign such forms were on vacation. The State College Area School District wouldn't sign the form until the portfolio had been reviewed, which would not occur until after our graduation ceremony. Moreover, when I did receive a signed form, I had no way of verifying the signature of the school official.

Next year, we would like to just have the written verification signed by the supervisor of the home education program and have it name the school district of residence of the home education program. This revised verification form would enable us to investigate, if we had reason to doubt, by simply calling the school district.

Fortunately, Greg acceded to my request. The current copy of the draft only requires the signature of the parent, not the signature of the school official, that the home education program is in compliance with Pennsylvania law.

Highlights of the Policy

- A home education association that gives diplomas must be non-profit and have (1) written by-laws, (2) at least five non-related members, and (3) a board of directors.
- The association must submit an application for recognition every three years. Those currently recognized can wait three years before submitting their first.
- Blank diplomas must be maintained by the association in a secure location and controlled using a registration or numbering system.
- The association will establish procedures to be used by its evaluators for determining when and if credits are awarded.
- An officer of the association will review the annual written evaluations of educational progress and the documentation (such as a transcript) of high school record signed by its evaluators and other required documentation and determine that the candidate received an appropriate education (as determined by an evaluator) during each year in a Pennsylvania home education program and that the candidate has met the requirements for graduation. That officer must either be an experienced high school evaluator or an experienced high school home education supervisor (i.e. parent).
- The association must require a written verification from the supervisor of the home education program that a review for non-compliance of the candidate's home education program by the superintendent of the district of residence has not been filed and that a due-process hearing is not pending. Furthermore, its bylaws or written procedures must prevent issuance of a diploma until such a review is completed. [This is the only proposal that will require a change in PHAA's bylaws. See the third resolution on the PHAA ballot on page 3.]

Historical Background

Pennsylvania's home education law, enacted in December 1988, specified requirements for high school graduation from a home education program, but did not specify who should give the diplomas. Over the next two years the Department of Education issued a series of negative answers about who should give the diplomas:

- They wrote the school districts that they did not have to issue the diplomas.
- They wrote me that they would not recognize diplomas issued by parents.
- They waffled about whether they would be willing to issue the diplomas themselves.

On October 2, 1990, Dr. Phillip Mulvihill, Chief of the Division of Advisory Services at the Pennsylvania Department of Education, turned down my request that the Department of Education issue the diplomas. He wrote, "It is not clear to me how the government could issue a credential for an educational program that was intentionally removed from government control." Instead, he recommended that the diplomas be issued by homeschoolers' organizations. He concluded:

It seems more appropriate to me to have the credential for home schoolers issued by a home schoolers organization. The monitoring and evaluation could then be done by individuals familiar with these programs and the quality control could be enforced by those individuals who have a vested interest in maintaining that quality.

Based upon Mulvihill's letter, Pennsylvania Homeschoolers put together a diploma program, Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Accreditation Agency (PHAA). We set up standards for awarding high school credits, published a guide to our diplomas, and enrolled evaluators and home education programs as members. We graduated 5 home educated seniors in 1991.

Over the next three years the Department of Education, under the Casey Administration, recognized our diplomas, and those of two other homeschool organizations, in letters written to the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency (PHEAA) and Penn State University. Both PHEAA and Penn State then dropped their requests that our graduates take the GED.

Our students and graduates have been excelling academically as measured by test scores reported by the College Board and the National Merit Scholarship Corporation. Those who have attended college have been doing very well as measured by first semester GPA's reported by their parents. Among those who have not attended college, some have already begun expanding family businesses or founding their own businesses.

Colleges have been very receptive to homeschool graduates. Fifteen different colleges set up tables and made presentations at this year's PHAA "High School at Home" conference. At last year's conference, Ann Rohrbach, Assistant Director of the Undergraduate Admissions Office at Penn State University, reported that all 33 homeschooled applicants were accepted in 1997.

In the meantime the continued recognition of homeschoolers' diplomas in Pennsylvania continues to make Pennsylvania one of the most vibrant states for high school education at

home. Homeschoolers from neighboring states come to Pennsylvania for our sports tournaments, on-line AP courses, and high school at home conferences.

A Look at the Future

By fall, the Department will begin adding new homeschool organizations to its list of those whose diplomas are recognized. As a result, the number of diploma alternatives for homeschoolers in PA will expand.

The next hurdle will occur when one of our graduates files an affidavit to teach his or her own children and the Department of Education is asked to write a letter to a school district holding that the home education diploma is valid. In my opinion, this new policy assures that such a letter would be forthcoming.