

## Thinking about Transferring to Public High School?

from Susan Richman

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*It's another distraught parent on the phone. "We need help. We just found out from our high school guidance counselor that our daughter can come back and attend public school but that none of her homeschooling credits for 9th and 10th grade will transfer. Instead of considering her an 11th grader, they want to put her back in 9th grade!"*

I ask questions, so that I can understand the whole story. Usually it goes like this: the family has been homeschooling several years, using the school district's books. They thought this would insure ready transfer back into public school. They'd never planned on having their child graduate as a homeschooler, and so had never looked into any of the diploma options available for homeschool students or weren't aware such programs existed. The local principal has done their evaluations each year, for free and no, they don't have any written evaluation letter from him. But they'd felt sure that he'd always said everything was just fine, and they thought it was clearly understood that the daughter might be coming back into the school at some future point.

Now they're in for a bad surprise. The superintendent had no idea of what the principal had promised, and maybe the principal never had really promised transfer credits maybe he was only saying that the family was not truant, and that they were meeting the guidelines of the homeschool law. District policy, previously unheard of by the parent, states firmly that no credit will be given for work completed while homeschooling or maybe no credits unless a student takes and passes any or all final tests given in the equivalent courses at the high school.

This seems to be the new hot area of homeschooling difficulties. The PA Department of Education lets districts know that they can call the shots on transfer credits the law is silent on the issue, and districts are urged to set their own policies. Districts view these policies as ways to circumvent possible problems, but often they only paint a district into a corner that leaves them, and the families, with no options.

So what can parents do? First, they should think carefully about homeschooling in high school can they commit to going the whole way through? There are a growing number of excellent diploma options for homeschoolers, and colleges and technical schools love homeschool applicants. I often tell families it's sometimes easier for a homeschooler to get into a good college than to transfer back into the public school. If a family feels strongly that they do not want to continue homeschooling all the way through to graduation, and they know their district has a very restrictive policy on transfer, maybe they'll want to make a different decision about 9th grade. Once you get to the high school years it can no longer be as it was in the elementary years "Oh, well, we're just taking it one year at a time!" At the high school level, starting with 9th grade, you need to think long term, to make the best decision for your family.

Second, families should find out their district's current policy on transfer credits for work completed while homeschooling. Is there a written policy? If so, get a copy. If there is no policy, discuss the issue with the district exactly what types of transcripts and records would they need to see in order to grant credit? Would they need the family to have outside verification of course credits, such as through one of the recognized home education diploma programs in PA, or through an accredited program such as Keystone National High School? Would looking carefully through the student's portfolio of work be enough? Whatever is decided, get it in writing. Almost always when there has been a conflict and the family thought the district had previously given an OK to the family's plans, there was never anything in writing from the district detailing the agreement.

Third, start the process early in the year that is, don't wait until late August to enroll your child back into public high school, and expect all to be fine. Barbara Heisy, in the Annville-Cleona School District, started the negotiation process in April, anticipating her daughter would return to school the next fall. Her daughter was required to take the final exams for courses she'd never taken English classes where different books had been read, math classes that used different texts. It was grueling, but the daughter came out fine. Eventually a personal meeting with the superintendent in late July, to look over the family's detailed records of progress in their portfolio, smoothed the way for transfer of all credits. They also contacted the school board, and began negotiations to amend the district policy. If Barbara had waited until late August to start this process, nothing would have been worked out in time for opening day of school.

And this leads to the fourth suggestion if you think the local policy needs to be changed and amended, start lining up fellow homeschooling families and evaluators in the district who are willing to come and speak at school board meetings, to persuade members to vote for a change. I'd say that policies that ask students to take all final exams for courses given in the public school should definitely be changed they make no educational sense.

And what sort of changes should be suggested? I think it's unrealistic to ask simply for a blanket acceptance of all homeschool credits based solely on a positive evaluation especially if the written evaluation is one of the 'shorties' that simply states that 'everything is fine, the end,' with no mention of specific course titles or credits earned, and no summary transcript. But when a student has firm documentation and descriptive evaluation letters, including official transcripts from one of the recognized diploma programs in PA, or from a program like Keystone that has clear and recognized standards for course completion and credit, then it should be easy for a public high school to accept credits in the same way that they would from a private school. If a student is not associated with any outside program, but has excellent documentation such as SAT II scores, AP scores, PSAT scores along with careful summaries of what was completed in each course, and a well-organized portfolio of work, then it should again be easy for a district to accept credits. Parents could also present their own one-page transcript of completed courses, officially printed out on computer never underestimate the need for school officials to have something proper to put in their files. Having the right piece of paper can be crucial.

One district seemed to have a problem in simply reading and understanding their own policy, and my suggested revisions were mostly to clarify things. It stated in one place that the district superintendent, working with other professionals in the district, would look over all records of homeschool students enrolling or re-enrolling in the public school system, looking

carefully at the portfolio, annual evaluation report, and any other documentation shown, to determine the proper placement level. Fine. The district is allowing for at least some flexibility. However, the next paragraph of the policy states: 'Home schooled students do not receive high school credit for work completed at home, and are not eligible for an Annville-Cleona High School Diploma.' I felt this was clearly talking only about students who continued homeschooling all the way through the end of their senior year it was just clarifying that these students would not receive credit towards the district diploma for this work (this has indeed been an area of confusion in many districts homeschoolers sometimes think the district will award them a diploma). But the district personnel thought this meant they could not award transfer credits to students re-enrolling back into public school. I suggested an easy way to clarify that each paragraph was about a different topic, and added in extra language about the district evaluating for transfer credits, with a brief list of other diploma options for homeschool students.

We would be very interested in hearing of any experiences PA homeschooling families have with transferring back into public school. It can be especially helpful to hear the success stories the ones where a family persevered in their request, and where a district was flexible in really taking a look at a homeschooler's individual record and making a fair decision. Up in Williamsport, Sharon Upright had a very positive experience with her daughter Fawn transferring in as an 11th grader this fall. She writes:

"Fawn says the school district hasn't been just good to us, they've been great! Can you detect her school spirit? There was one assistant principal that really went all out for her. What a provision from the Lord!

"I had to resubmit all of Fawn's 9th grade work to receive credit. There were piles of paperwork waiting to be pitched laying around my living room for over a year. We would come to find out after a year, that all of that stuff was needed! I guess keeping a cluttered home sometimes can have its advantages, as I had the necessary papers to submit for 9th grade. I almost was going to throw them in the trash (I think the Lord had His hand in that one too!). Fawn had biology that year and really didn't care for it nor did she desire to retain most of the paperwork. I usually have my kids sort through their portfolios after we get them back from the superintendent and we keep just the stuff they really liked. I will hang on to all high school coursework after this, even if they say they don't want to go to the high school!

"Her 10th grade work was still in the portfolio, so that was easy. She did have to come up with more English work for it to count as College English and she did, so they gave her credit for that.

"They approved everything but physical education. They wanted to make her do four gym classes per week, due to the fact that she just did not include enough proof in her portfolio (our fault!). When I asked if I could re-submit phys. ed., they said okay, and eventually approved what I resubmitted. The only thing she had to make-up was a drivers ed course.

"They said she would be treated as a transfer student and receive a pass/fail grade, with all her classes being "pass." That was fine with us. They said she would also receive a class standing, just as everyone else. I thought that was good news. Our evaluator thought she

would go through high school being unranked. They have been pretty good to us, I can't complain."

A later note shared the good news that Fawn was on the honor roll for the first marking period, and doing super in all of her classes. She's obviously made a fine transition and I'm sure the whole process has made the school feel much more confident in looking over future homeschoolers' records for transfer credit. By the way, I fully agree with the decision of this school district to assign just a 'pass' to her transfer credits and indeed I feel that this is something districts should probably consider adding in to their policies in this area. This falls right in line with what most colleges do with transfer credits from other colleges they accept the credit but not the grade. And as in the situation with Fawn, the student will then start their public high school GPA with their public school coursework and this should pose no problem at all for college admissions.

Cindy Jackson, of the Penn Hills School District in a suburb of Pittsburgh, also had a very smooth time in working with the high school guidance counselor when her daughter Rebecca opted to transfer into public high school for 11th grade. The family had excellent records transcript from a diploma program, good portfolio, and more. Cindy felt it was especially helpful that Rebecca had taken the PSAT as a 10th grader and done very well, and that she had also gotten an 'A' at a community college course in chemistry the guidance counselor realized they had plenty of objective evidence that Rebecca was a bright and motivated student, and he worked hard to make sure that she could sign up for any advanced courses she wanted, and accepted all her credits from her years of homeschooling. The family also started the process at the end of the 10th grade year, letting the district know that they were ready to work with the school cooperatively to make for an easy transition. The only very minor glitch was that Rebecca would not be eligible for the school's chapter of the National Honor Society, as they could not use her homeschool grades for this purpose (NHS has very strict guidelines).

Mary Patel found things a bit rougher in dealing with the Peters Township School District in Washington County, when her son Kyle was enrolling for 11th grade. By starting talking with the high school very early on, and holding firm to her position on the most controversial points, things seem to have worked out fine. The district wanted to require that Kyle take eight major final exams, covering core subjects in both 9th and 10th grade courses. Through negotiations and discussion Mary was able to convince the district that this was educationally totally unsound. The school relented a bit, and took it down to requiring only math tests for Integrated Math I and II, plus English. Kyle got A's on both math tests, and even opted to take the final for Integrated Math III Honors, even though he was registered to take that course. He scored well enough to pass out of this course also, although the family opted for him to actually take it, he's now pulling a straight A. The English exam was never actually given perhaps in part due just to district bungling.

Kyle has a challenging full load of courses this fall, with no study halls, and is earning straight A's in everything but Latin I, where he has a solid B. On parents' night at the school Mary found that all of Kyle's teachers were more than pleased with his progress and his obvious drive to learn he was described as a real leader in class discussion, a fine contributor in class, one of the very top students. Many of the teachers were surprised to find out that Kyle had been homeschooled all his life, and I'm sure their impression of homeschoolers has been changed to the positive because of Kyle.

Although Kyle's credits for 9th and 10th grades still haven't been finalized, it is clear that he has made a very fine impression on the whole school. Mary also found that when negotiations with the principal and assistant were most difficult, it helped to talk with the new superintendent, a woman who had worked with Mary in earlier years as the district official in charge of overseeing homeschooling. It always is a help to find someone who is flexible and supportive when you hit a roadblock.

Again, we are very interested in hearing from families about their experiences in transferring homeschool credits into high school. The most important thing to remember is...

**Think ahead!**