

Misleading Report Circulated at State Capital

from Howard Richman

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A research paper entitled *Quality Control of Home Schooling in Pennsylvania* by Dr. Steven A. Melnick of Penn State, Harrisburg, was recently passed out to many legislators in Harrisburg. It was based upon results of surveys of home schoolers, school administrators, and Departments of Education in other states. Unfortunately, Melnick misunderstood the home education law and over-generalized his findings. This paper could leave legislators with many misimpressions about home education in Pennsylvania.

Inaccurate Portrayal of Home Ed. Law

Melnick began with a portrayal of Pennsylvania's home education law which was so inaccurate as to cast doubt upon his credibility. This portrayal began:

Unfortunately Act 169 was not written specifically as a "home schooling act," but rather amended the compulsory attendance law, thereby providing the opportunity to educate children at home. Consequently, the language of the Act is vague and open to interpretation....

However, if he would have looked up the laws that specifically address private home education in other states, he would have found them all in the compulsory education sections of the school code. This is so because it is only compulsory education which gives the state any say over private education.

He then stated, wrongly, that parents test their own children under the provisions of Act 169. Specifically he wrote, "All home schooled students must take a nationally norm-referenced standardized test in grades 3, 5 and 8 — these tests can be administered by the parent.." Actually the home education law is quite specific that the tests can not be administered by the parent.

Perhaps his biggest misunderstanding was in regard to home education evaluations. Throughout his paper he ignored the fact that the quality of home education is already evaluated in Pennsylvania by those teachers, former teachers, and psychologists who are privately hired and paid for by parents to interview their children, evaluate their portfolios, and specify that appropriate education is taking place. Melnick instead appears to think that the school districts pay for and conduct these evaluations. For example, in his introduction he wrote, "Each home school supervisor is required to maintain a portfolio of student work documenting the student's progress -- this portfolio must be evaluated by a qualified evaluator at district expense."

Judging from this inaccurate summary of Pennsylvania's home education law, one would give Melnick a "D" or an "F" in reading!

Melnick's Parent Survey

The 228 parents that he surveyed were parents who participated in fall testing with Pennsylvania Homeschoolers testing service. As a result of taking the time to learn about home schoolers by conducting this survey, Melnick became impressed with home schooling parents' level of education and the stability of the home schooling family. Specifically, he found that home schoolers come from stable two parent families with relatively high parent-education levels and concluded that these factors might contribute to home schoolers' higher levels of academic achievement.

Melnick also found that parents reported spending an average of \$422 per child (the median level that home schoolers report nationally is \$450 according to research conducted by Brian Ray) compared to \$4,000 to \$9,000 per child in Pennsylvania public schools, and then concluded, "Home schooled children do not receive the same level of support as their public school counterparts." However, if he had read our 1990 and 1992 studies (that were published in the *Home School Researcher*) of test results with the same population (those tested in the fall by the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers testing service), he would have learned that these students have, over the years, consistently had a mean achievement corresponding to the 86th percentile in total reading and the 73rd percentile in total math. Thus, if he had put these results in context, his conclusion might have been quite different: Instead of worrying that home schoolers were being limited by lack of resources, he might have speculated upon how home schoolers could get so much more education than public schools out of each dollar.

Melnick also found a variation in the amount of money that parents report spending per child on home education and concluded that this indicated "a disparity in available resources among home school students." However, this variation should not be surprising! Every beginning statistics course discusses normal distributions and how they tend to arise as the result of the normal variation of things. Also, if he would have read our 1990 Home School Researcher study of test results with the same population, or Brian Ray's 1999 study of the national home schooling population, he would have learned that home schoolers' family income is not significantly correlated with academic achievement.

Melnick also asked parents whether they would like to get more services and more monitoring of their programs by school districts. While 89% thought that home schooled children should be allowed to participate in school district extra-curricular activities, only 30% thought that the school district should bear more of the costs of home schooling, and only 1% wanted more monitoring of their programs by school districts.

Survey of School District Administrators

Most of Melnick's questionnaire to districts paralleled his questionnaire to parents. He found that only 27% of the administrators felt that home schooled students should be allowed to participate in extra-curricular activities and that 64% of the school administrators thought that home schoolers should monitor the progress of their own children.

One of his questions asked school administrators "to estimate the real cost to the district of administering and evaluating home schooling each year (including salaries and fringe benefits)." [Again Melnick repeated his misunderstanding that school districts perform home school evaluations.] He found that school administrators estimate spending an average of about \$6,200 per year to do the home schooling paperwork.

Melnick did not suggest ways that the school districts' paperwork could be reduced, but I will suggest two of the most obvious. Procedures could easily be streamlined for each of the two tasks that involve school administrators:

- The beginning-of-the-year home education notarized affidavit could be streamlined to include fewer attachments. Then the administrators could simply place it in a file without having to take the time to go back and forth with parents if attachments have not all been included.
- The end-of-the-year reporting requirement could be simplified so that home schoolers no longer turn in the entire portfolio for review, which must later be returned to the parents, but simply turn in a copy of the evaluation letter (which certifies that an appropriate education is taking place) and required test results. Then superintendents could simply place the evaluation letter and test results in a file.

Melnick's most controversial conclusion came when he asked the school administrators to give their estimates of the quality of the work submitted by home schooled students in their portfolios. His Table 11 displays these administrators' impressions of the quality of the work that they see. It was top heavy with good grades: 50% of the students achieving "A" level work, 29% "B" level, 28% "C" level, 14% "D" level, and 9% "F" level. It is noteworthy that these figures add up to 130% instead of 100%. Although Melnick had clearly directed the administrators in capital letters in his survey, "(PERCENTS SHOULD SUM TO 100%)," the administrators presented Melnick with data that didn't add up. Perhaps the strongest implication of this data is that school administrators deserve a "D" or "F" in math!

Undeterred by the clear inaccuracy of his result, Melnick drew the conclusion from it that, "The district may need to monitor student progress more frequently and, if necessary, revoke the right to home school."

He never explained why he thought a normal variation in grades is only acceptable in public schools, not in home education. Obviously, not every homeschooled student is "above average." Many parents have chosen home education in order to meet the needs, through individualized instruction, of their LD or ADHD children. Perhaps Melnick believed that only those from Garrison Keillor's mythical Lake Wobegon ("where all the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average") should be permitted to home school!

Nor did he speculate about how many of these supposed "D" or "F" students were failing in school before their parents, in desperation, brought them home. (There are many high school students with records of failures and discipline problems whose parents are bringing them home in a last-ditch attempt to salvage their educations.)

Nor did Melnick express any doubt that the administrators' actually have knowledge of these students' achievement, perhaps because he was still under the misimpression that the school districts, not private evaluators, conduct the in-depth evaluations of home education portfolios.

Nor did Melnick consider that the home schooling community could help these "D" or "F" students. Perhaps school administrators could let new home schoolers know about

conferences and curriculum fairs that take place at locations throughout Pennsylvania including annual conferences that take place in Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, Erie, and Stroudsburg. Information about these events is available on the Internet. Perhaps it could be collected by the Pennsylvania Department of Education and passed along to Pennsylvania's 501 school districts, or perhaps home school support groups could be more proactive letting districts know about these home school "in service" options.

According to interviews that Melnick conducted with a few school administrators from the Harrisburg area, the home schooled parents who are giving their children an "inadequate education" are those parents who "reactively pull their child out of the public school because of behavior problems or as a result of a particular incident." It is indeed likely that such parents would not have taken the time to learn about home education before they began.

It is possible, however, that school administrators were not completely objective in their criticisms of these parents. I may have talked with such parents on the phone. Typical examples are "DL" who told me that she decided to home school because her son was being beaten up in school and the principal wouldn't do anything about it and "SG" who told me her son was being publicly humiliated by a teacher and that the principal indeed recognized the problem but would not take any action to stop it. Perhaps if Dr. Melnick had taken the time to interview some of these "inadequate" parents, he might have found another side of the story that pointed to the existence of "inadequate" school administrators.

Melnick's Conclusions

Most of Melnick's conclusions are thoughtful and reasonable. For example:

- "Pennsylvania, through Act 169, provides more structure and control of home schooling than do most states...." [This was his main conclusion from his survey of other states.]
- "There is an obvious disparity in how home schoolers and districts perceive their communication with each other. On one hand, 17 percent of home schoolers agree the district welcomes communication from them; 65 percent of the school districts believe that they welcome communication...."
- "There is little disagreement between groups that parents should monitor the progress of their own children...."
- "It is clear from district reports that most home schooled students do "A" or "B" work (78 percent). Parental monitoring does seem to be appropriate and effective...."
- "District policies vary widely regarding participation of home schoolers in extracurricular activities and academic courses...."

Melnick's Implications

The final section of Melnick's paper advanced possible policy implications. He suggested that discussion begin toward the possibility of a trade, with home schoolers getting direct financial assistance in return for increased monitoring. Specifically:

Although home school parents value their independence, many want the district to bear more of the cost. It seems inconsistent to be independent yet receive direct assistance without any accountability. Clearly much discussion needs to occur between state policy makers, district administrators, and home schoolers before the educational needs of all children in the state are met.

Indeed, at least three states have already established public home education options (Washington, California, and Alaska) that stand side-by-side with private home education as an alternative for home schoolers. Those home schoolers who want state funding and monitoring of their programs go with the public home education option while those who value their independence go with the private home education option.

Alternative Implications

Although Melnick did not state the following implications for private home education, they follow from his data:

1. Neither school administrators nor home schoolers want to trade school district money for home school freedom. Specifically, only 30% of home schoolers and only 1% of school administrators think that the school district should bear more of the costs of home education. At the same time, 90% of home schoolers and 64% of school administrators think that home schoolers should monitor the progress of their own children.
2. Affidavits and end-of-the-year reporting procedures should be simplified in order to reduce the administrative costs to the school districts.
3. In order to help new home schoolers get a firm start, communication between home school organizations and school districts should be improved. Perhaps the Pennsylvania Department of Education could take on the role of passing along information about upcoming home school conferences and curriculum fairs to the 501 school districts via the new PA Dept of Education web site (<http://www.pde.psu.edu/homeed/homeed.html>). Then school administrators could routinely refer new home schoolers to this already-helpful web site. □⁹

For your own copy of Quality Control of Homeschooling in Pennsylvania, write to Dr. Steven Melnick, School of Behavioral Sciences, Penn State Harrisburg, 777 West Harrisburg Pike, Middletown PA 17057