

## Homeschoolers Meet to Discuss Legislation

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On February 14 Representative Tom Armstrong and I organized a meeting in Harrisburg to discuss the possible opening of the homeschooling law in order to address various problems that might require legislative solution. The meeting was attended by three state representatives who are (or have been) homeschool dads (Rep. Rohrer, Rep. Armstrong, and Rep. Yewcik) as well as representatives of nine homeschool organizations that represent the diverse homeschool community in Pennsylvania. There were two big stories that arose out of the meeting. First, that the problem caused by the professional development bill was in the process of being resolved. This is the bill that recently passed as HB 8 requiring certified teachers to take courses every 5 years in order to keep their certification active. Second, that an on-going process has begun toward putting together a revision of the home education law in order to ease the regulatory burden upon homeschoolers. This process is in the exploratory stage. There has been no commitment to actually introduce a bill.

At the meeting Representatives Sam Rohrer and Representative Tom Armstrong announced that they had already solved the most pressing of those problems, the recently passed professional-development bill (HB 8) which five years from now could have eliminated almost all of our evaluators who are both certified teachers and homeschooling parents. (These parents would have had to find the time in their busy schedules to take two courses every five years to keep their certification active.)

According to Rep. Rohrer, the Senate has agreed to language that would insure that homeschoolers can hire inactive certified teachers as their evaluators. This language will be an "agreed-to" part of the budget resolution that is currently being negotiated.

For the first time in a number of years, the leaders of most of the major statewide homeschooling groups met to discuss possible changes to the homeschooling law.

The bulk of the meeting was a discussion of proposals made by Dee Black, a lawyer with the Home School Legal Defense Association, that would eliminate most of the conflicts between homeschoolers and school districts.

I could see a possible bill emerging from the meeting that would move Pennsylvania out of the ranks of the most highly regulated states. Specifically, all of the following measures could possibly be included:

1. The medical services and/or immunization attachments to the home education affidavit could be eliminated. This would both protect homeschool privacy and reduce the administrative burden of the school districts.
2. Only the evaluation (or only the evaluation and test scores) would be turned in to the school district at the end of the school year. This would protect homeschool privacy, reduce administrative costs, and reduce the administrative burden upon the school districts.

3. A clear statement could be added to law that local school districts cannot make policies that go beyond the home education law. Dee Black said that most of the conflicts that he sees between homeschoolers and their districts arise out of school district attempts to create policies that add requirements beyond those of the home education law.
4. A statement could be placed into law addressing who gives homeschool diplomas. I would favor recognizing the current system of diploma granting which is now PA Department of Education policy, but not yet recognized in statute. Specifically:
  - o That the Department of Education continue to maintain a list of nonprofit homeschool organizations whose standards and procedures insure that the requirements of the home education law are met, and will continue to recognize the validity of those diplomas. Last year there were only three diploma-granting homeschool organizations on the Department of Education list. Now there are six. Two of the organizations present at the meeting (PHAA and Mason Dixon Homeschoolers) already offer Department of Education recognized diplomas. Others could easily establish their own diploma program and get their diplomas recognized if they wish.
  - o That the Department of Education also recognize home education diplomas awarded by parents if their school superintendent signs a statement that the student has met the graduation requirements of the home education law.
5. A statement could be placed into law that those high school credits (but not grades) awarded by recognized home education organizations must in turn be recognized by school districts should a home education student transfer into a public school at the high school level.
6. The classroom grading experience requirement for certified teachers who do evaluations could be eliminated. This would let newly graduated certified teachers do evaluations without first having to teach in a school for two years.
7. The law could be clarified that the annual written evaluation obtained by the parent should be accepted by the superintendent as determinative of whether an appropriate education is taking place. Under current law, the superintendent may disregard the evaluation and make a contrary finding.
8. School districts could be required to provide special education services to homeschoolers should the parents request. Those services can now be negotiated, but a few school districts refuse to grant them.
9. Grandparents (and perhaps other relatives) could be permitted to homeschool.

There were also three proposals made which, in my opinion, would be very unwise as they would greatly reduce the chances of passing the bill:

1. That districts be mandated to permit homeschool participation in school sports and extra-curriculars. State mandates are opposed by conservative legislators who normally support homeschool freedom. You really can't push for homeschool freedom and school district goodies in the same bill and expect it to pass.
2. Homeschool parents with ten years experience supervising home education programs could be automatically permitted to evaluate. Despite the fact that this was my own proposal, I realize that you can't greatly loosen the qualifications of evaluators at the same time that you reduce the superintendent's ability to challenge evaluations.
3. That any parent who files a home education affidavit can give their child a diploma which must, then, be recognized by the state. I have worked with the Department of

Education for more than a decade now on this question of diploma granting. In my opinion, the Department of Education would never stand for a standardless diploma that any parent could give their child. Such a diploma could even be given by the parent of a dropout who had just homeschooled for two months at the end of his senior year. I myself would actually oppose any bill that included this provision.

The various participants at the meeting have all agreed to consult with their membership about legislative priorities and get back by e-mail with those priorities by March 31. Then there will be a meeting on April 10 to see where we stand. Thus far there has been no commitment by any of the participants to pursue a change in the law.

If you want to have input regarding a possible legislative effort, you need to contact one of the homeschoolers who participated in the meeting: Dee Black (HSLDA), Mary Hudzinski (Mason Dixon Homeschoolers), Wendy Bush (Home School Connection), Norma Young (Pennsylvania Home Education Network), Ellen Kramer (Catholic Homeschoolers of PA), Michael Geer (Pennsylvania Family Institute), Chris Pfaff (representing North Central PA), David Peterman (SEARCH), Doug & Neda Rothgaber (CHAP), Mr. & Mrs. Clyde Gwin (CHAP), Bruce and Mary Eagleson (CHAP), or myself (PA Homeschoolers).

Unfortunately, I will be in the midst of a long evaluation trip and won't have time to talk to you in person. If you are a subscriber to this newsletter (or a member of PHAA) and want to have input, just go up to the Pennsylvania Homeschoolers web site: <http://www.pahomeschoolers.com/legislation/>. You will be prompted for a username and password. Your username is 'pa' your password is 'homeschoolers'. There you will find forms that you can use to vote on which proposals you would support, which you would oppose, and how strongly you feel about each proposal. I will in-turn relay your positions to the legislators.

In my opinion it is not possible to enact a "perfectly free" homeschooling option given the possibility of abuses of homeschooling by non-educating parents. However, I think that it is possible to virtually eliminate the conflicts between families and school districts in PA.