

HSLDA Opens New Graduation Option

from Howard Richman

[from Issue 82, Spring 2003, of PA HOMESCHOOLERS newsletter]

As a result of the lobbying efforts in Washington of the Home School Legal Defense Association's (HSLDA), the U.S. Department of Education has adopted a new policy allowing homeschoolers to "self-certify" completion of high school at home when filling out federal forms, such as the forms that are used when applying for a federal government grant for college. This new policy was included in the 2002-2003 revision of the Federal Student Handbook. It opens up a new diploma option for homeschoolers in Pennsylvania and across the nation -- parent-issued diplomas and "self-certification" by students of their own completion of high school studies.

Parents issuing such diplomas would be well advised to join HSLDA, at least for their student's senior year. The self-certified completion is specifically not recognized by the federal government to be a high school diploma or its equivalent. As a result, those with self-certified parent-issued diplomas will sometimes run into roadblocks. Then if the diploma is challenged, HSLDA's lawyers will come to your defense. For example, when Baylor University denied admittance to six homeschooled graduates of age 17 and younger just because they did not have recognized diplomas, HSLDA was able to work out a one-time exception for the graduate who was from a member family. The other five homeschool graduates either had to first pass the GED to be admitted, or were only admitted as "non-degree-seeking" students.

Unfortunately, even with HSLDA's help, some problems cannot be overcome. Although the HSLDA told the PA House Education Committee in June 2002 that homeschoolers were not having problems, articles on the HSLDA's website have reported unresolved problems with colleges and employers in state after state. Some colleges and employers won't admit anyone who lacks a recognized diploma. For example, in March 2002 homeschool graduate Fred Isaack from an HSLDA member family lost out on a job offer as a railroad conductor because his parent-issued diploma was not recognized and he could not take and get the results back from the GED in time for conductor training.

I recently wrote to Dee Black of HSLDA asking for clarification about exactly what homeschoolers in PA would have to do in order for HSLDA to back their parent-issued diploma. I explained that I had two mothers in mind who had just called me that week.

One mother said she had a bright 16-year-old son in public school ninth grade who had just fathered a child and wanted to get a full time job in order to support his girl friend and child. This mother hoped to homeschool him so that he could work during the day. I read her the part of the PA compulsory school code which states that a 16-year-old can drop-out if he has a work permit and a job during the day when school is in session. That seemed to satisfy her because her main concern was a possible truancy prosecution. I was wondering if I should have told her to file a home education affidavit for her 16-year-old son, join HSLDA, have him drop-out at 17, and then issue him a diploma backed by the HSLDA. He could work full-time while at the same time earning a diploma from his mother.

Perhaps he could get an HSLDA-backed diploma even before he had completed four years of high school, thus quickly enhancing his ability to support his new family.

The other mother said that her 18-year-old son had just dropped out of high school midway through his senior year. She was considering homeschooling him for the remainder of his senior year so that he could get a diploma. The Pennsylvania Homeschoolers Accreditation Agency diploma was not available since our bylaws require that the student spend his entire senior year in a home education program. I gave the mother the phone numbers of two correspondence schools (American School and International Correspondence School) that were designed to give adult drop-outs a second chance. I was wondering, however, if I should have told her to file a home education affidavit for her 18-year-old son, join HSLDA, and then issue her son a parent-issued diploma that would be backed by HSLDA. Dee Black (HSLDA) e-mailed me the following replies to my five questions:

QUESTION 1. Does the student have to be homeschooled for more than just the second half of his senior year in order for HSLDA to back the diploma?

HSLDA: No.

QUESTION 2. Does the student have to spend 4 years in high school, or can a student go from 9th through 12th grade more quickly and still have HSLDA back the diploma?

HSLDA: Under Penn. law, the student must receive at least 990 hours of instruction each year. I believe the intent of the "years" requirements for graduation courses is that the student complete a year's worth of material. I don't see any reason why a student could not complete more than a year's worth of school in one school year. For example, it's possible for a student to complete both an algebra I textbook and a geometry textbook in a 12-month school year. I think that would constitute two "years" of math. Obviously, someone could make a contrary argument.

QUESTION 3. If a family were to join HSLDA before graduation and self-certify graduation while still members of HSLDA, but then drop their HSLDA membership, would HSLDA continue to back the diploma should they have problems with a college or employer?

HSLDA: Our practice has been as a courtesy to assist former members who are having this type of problem, recognizing that the family may no longer be homeschooling and have no need for legal defense of their right to homeschool.

QUESTION 4. Will HSLDA back the self-certified diploma of a student who drops-out from complying with the Pennsylvania home education law at age 17 before completing the graduation requirements of the PA home education law (4 years of English, 3 years of math,...)?

HSLDA: I don't think such a position would be defensible in light of Penn.'s requirements for graduation in the home education statute. So if I encountered such a situation, I would advise the person of the need to complete the graduation requirements or get a GED.

QUESTION 5. Are there any standards that must be fulfilled before HSLDA will back a member family's self-certified diploma?

HSLDA: The key is state law. In Penn. the graduation requirements are set forth in the home education statute. I don't see how we can argue on behalf of someone who hasn't completed the graduation requirements. Self-certification is not intended as a means of avoiding the graduation requirements established under state law.

These answers make it clear that HSLDA is not providing a way to bypass the requirements of the PA home education law. They realize that they cannot defend the diploma unless the student has completed all of the graduation requirements while still enrolled in a home education program.

This self-certified diploma would require too much time to be practical for the 16-year-old 9th grader who wanted to work full time to support his child and girlfriend. It could, however, be a good option for the 18-year-old who had just left school midway through his senior year. His mother would just need to file a home education program affidavit, join HSLDA, and then help her son devote the required hours to home education and complete the remaining high school credit requirements. The membership would just cost \$100 for the senior year and the diploma from the HSLDA's online store would just cost \$17. Although the diploma would not be recognized, HSLDA lawyers would be available to help in the few cases when it might not be accepted.