

Sarah Pearce Leaves Homeschool Position at PDE

from Howard Richman

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Again and again over the past five years the same scenario has played out again and again: a distraught homeschooler calls us because her district is making up their own version of the homeschool law, Susan or I suggest that the homeschooler call Sarah Pearce at the School Services Unit of the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). Then Sarah Pearce would call the school district and the problem would be solved.

Sarah was a totally competent administrator who took her job seriously and did it well. She developed the home education webpages on the PDE website (to find this website go to www.pahomeschoolers.com and click on "PA Dept of Ed") making it easier for homeschoolers to find the information that they needed, and she developed a homeschool packet that she sent out when new homeschoolers called to find out how to get started.

I first met Sarah when she was the legislative liaison, one of the most powerful figures in the PDE during the Casey administration. She stepped in as the Casey administration's chief negotiator during the last few months just before the 1988 homeschool law's passage, and negotiated provisions such as the one which prevents convicted child abusers from homeschooling within 5 years of their conviction. When Republican Governor Ridge won his election, Sarah was one of the many political appointees to lose their jobs. Having two adopted children to support, she was able to obtain an administrative position at the bottom of the same Department of Education that she had helped to lead.

The first three years of the Ridge administration was a time of problems in the homeschool liaison office. The person who was then handling homeschool phone calls had a hands-off attitude and was reluctant to inform school districts of their limitations. It was a time of increasing friction between homeschoolers and school districts. Susan and I were relieved when Sarah was offered the homeschool liaison position and our hope that she would prove to be a tough and able administrator was fulfilled.

Susan or I would visit with her periodically in her little cubicle among the other administrators at the Department of Education. The last time was just after the election of Democratic Governor Rendell. I asked if she would be taking a political job now that it was again a Democratic administration. "No," she replied. She had her family to consider. However, just three months into Governor Rendell's term, I learned that she had again taken the leap to a political job that has no job security.

Sarah is now Director of Governor Rendell's Office of Government Relations working closely with Secretary of Education Vicki Phillips, and with a big private office of her own. As long as Democrats control the Governor's office, they will rely upon Sarah's competence to help them steer an effective course.

In the meantime, there are still helpful people who will be handling homeschooling issues in the School Services Unit at the PDE who would be reached if you call 717-787-4860:

- Stephen Fisher has worked at PDE for 23 years and for the School Services Unit for 12 years. He finished his undergraduate degree through the University of Nebraska while stationed overseas as a member of the United States Air Force. Although he is quite well versed on homeschooling issues, he is also the PDE's resident expert on the child labor law, something that is often confusing to homeschoolers.
- Marion Eckols-Clark has worked for 24 years at the PDE and 11 years in the school services unit. When she was first working for school services, homeschoolers would know her by her maiden name, Marion Gray.
- Tom Stubbits has been at the PDE for 10 years, with four years in school services. He got his undergraduate degree at the University of Georgia, his masters at USC, is a graduate of the US Army War College and the Armed Forces Staff College, and taught military strategy at the US Army War College. During the Reagan administration he was military assistant to Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger.
- Dr. Ronald Stainbrook has worked for the PDE for more than 30 years. His specialty with School Services is management assistance to school districts and he also administers correction education and alternative programs.
- James Buckheit is Director of School Services and the administrator to whom all of the others report. He has been working for the PDE for 12 years, and has been at School Services for 6 years. One of his first tasks at school services was crafting the PDE's written policy for recognition of homeschool diploma organizations. Last year he was the acting head of the State Board of Education. He is a competent administrator who makes sure that the School Services office is helpful and efficient.

Although we will miss Sarah Pearce's helpfulness, it is likely that the School Services Unit will continue to play a positive role in solving the inevitable frictions that will occur between homeschoolers and school districts. When I just interviewed Sarah a few weeks ago she told me, "I hope to maintain a good and close relationship with homeschoolers. I have really enjoyed this work."