

Hearings Held on Compulsory School Age Expansion

by Susan Richman

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On June 18, HB 1221, a bill which would expand the compulsory school age (currently 8-17) to 6-18 passed the PA House Education Committee. However, thanks to homeschoolers' phone calls and letters, the Republican leadership of the PA House of Representatives decided to send the bill back to the House Education Committee for hearings. Those hearings were held on August 12 in the West York Middle School auditorium. The auditorium holds over 1000 people, and about 50 homeschoolers were in attendance.

Two homeschool advocates, Mary Hudzinski and Nancy Emerson, were among those giving testimony on this issue, and they both gave well-reasoned and thorough research back-up for their position that a change in the compulsory school age could have unintended negative consequences as the bill was currently written.

Mary Hudzinski focused on the fact that the overwhelming majority of parents already send their children to school at age 5 or 6 (to kindergarten or 1st grade), and the legislation would only in actuality impact homeschooling families, who typically wait until age 8 to file their home education program affidavits. Mary proposed that if this bill should pass, that a special exemption be made for homeschooling families. She said,

"This could be accomplished with the following amendment at the end of Section 1327.1 (b) (1) 'Any child who has not attained the age of 8 by August 1st of the current school year is exempted from any reporting or evaluation requirements of Section 1327.1 and the affidavit is considered to be sufficient evidence that the child is receiving an appropriate education from the supervisor of the home education program.'"

Mrs. Hudzinski also gave information to help the Committee realize the potential problems of raising the compulsory school age, especially when some homeschool students would graduate at somewhat earlier ages. She brought in the example of her own daughter who is 16, and already has 6 college credits and who will not be 18 when she graduates from her high school home education program under the guidelines of the Mason-Dixon Homeschoolers Diploma Program. She offered two possible amendments that could avoid any problems for students in this situation: "Any student who demonstrates completion of graduation requirements by a notarized affidavit will be exempted from the compulsory attendance requirement. No further evidence may be requested or required." Or as an alternative wording, "Any student who produces a statement from a qualified home education evaluator that graduation requirements have been completed will no longer be subject to compulsory attendance requirements. No further evidence may be requested or required." Representatives from the PA Department of Education later in the day indicated that they were indeed very willing to work with homeschoolers on amendments such as these.

Mary also noted that raising the compulsory school age to 18 would do nothing to encourage a higher graduation rate, something that was interestingly enough echoed by

every other person testifying, even those who felt the lower compulsory school age was a good move: representatives from school districts, a judge with much experience in truancy hearings, and two representatives from the Boyer Center for Education at Messiah College. All warned that keeping disruptive students in school would be largely counter-productive. The only argument for raising the compulsory school age that seemed plausible was from the PA Department of Education, stating "Approval of HB 1221 would also bring compulsory school attendance into alignment with parental rights to care and direct the lives of their children through age 18. Under current law, student who turn 17 can drop out of school without their parent's approval. The Department receives frequent complaints from parents who want their child to stay in school but neither the parent nor school can compel the student to stay. Raising the compulsory school age to age 18 will provide parents and schools the authority necessary to keep students attending school until their 18th birthday, when they may be close enough to graduation that they would remain to earn their diploma." The PDE representative also stated that alternative programs for disruptive students are already serving 18,000 students, and that only 10% of students dropout because of behavior or disciplinary reasons. They also indicated that the current attendance exemptions for students working full-time at age 16 or in domestic or farm work situations at age 14 (the provision usually used only by the Amish) would still be in effect even with a higher compulsory school age of 18.

Nancy Emerson, whose background in occupational therapy as well as homeschooling has enabled her to see the broader issues of child development, focused on why lowering the compulsory school age would be damaging, not only to homeschoolers but to the larger population of school children who have delayed readiness for typical formal academics. She provided convincing quotes from top researchers in early childhood education that the continuing push to move academics lower and lower in the school curriculum has had negative effects on many children, who are now labeled as having learning problems when in reality they probably only needed a bit more time and more developmentally appropriate educational activities. Because the main proponents of lowering the school age were often really pushing the need for preschool educational programming, and not 1st and 2nd grade programs (which even they admitted virtually all parents except those homeschooling took advantage of) this was a very important point. Also, the PDE and other proponents of lowering the school age all agreed that there was no data at all available at this point that indicated any great numbers of children entering school at age 7 or 8 unprepared for 1st grade. Dr. Sponseller of the Chambersburg School District (the one superintendent testifying) felt that virtually no children in his district were simply kept out of school from age 6 to 8 unless they were homeschooled.

Nancy Emerson proposed two possible amendments very similar to Mary Hudzinski's that could fix problems seen with HB 1221:

"The term 'compulsory school age' shall not include any child whose 8th birthday falls after the first two weeks of the current school year, and who has not previously attended school at the first grade level or above, and whose parent has filed a letter of exemption for the current school year with the superintendent of the school district of residence."

"The term 'compulsory school age' shall not include any child who has been receiving instruction in a home education program, as provided for in section

1327.1 of this act and section 1327; and whose home education program is not out of compliance with the requirements of section 1327.1 and section 1327; and whose home education program is not in hearing procedures, as contained in section 1327.1; and who is at least 14 years old; and whose home education program supervisor submits to the superintendent of the school district of residence a notarized affidavit stating that, as determined by the supervisor, the child has met the requirements for graduation from a home education program as specified in section 1327.1(d)."

The Representatives asked thoughtful questions, indicating overall that they were a bit unconvinced of the need for this legislation as it now stood. They noted that in general all those testifying seemed unenthusiastic about raising the compulsory school age, and the legislators realized that it certainly appeared that most students actually are in school by ages 5 or 6, even with the current compulsory school age of 8, except those who homeschool. After attending the informational meeting, I feel positive that if action goes forward eventually on this legislation, then a compromise taking homeschoolers' concerns into consideration will be included.