

PA House Passes School Sports Bill

by Howard Richman

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Over the past decade, many bills have been introduced requiring that school districts let homeschoolers on their sports teams but none has ever gotten to first base until now.

House Bill 614 started out as an education bill that would just create penalties when a parent or guardian would falsely claim that a child resided in a school district in order to enroll that child in that district's schools. But on June 25, the day it was brought up for a final vote on the House Floor, Rep. Godshall proposed an amendment, which passed 149 to 51, adding school sports access as a "rider." Then the House passed the bill and it went to the PA Senate Education Committee. If it passes out of the Senate Education Committee and passes the Senate, and is signed by the Governor, all school districts throughout PA will be required to allow homeschoolers on their sports teams.

Homeschool activist Peter Hrycenko (610-437-5223) has asked homeschoolers to contact their own PA senator urging passage of HB 614 or the similar senate bill (SB 384), both of which are in the Senate Education Committee. Those who want to see school sports passed, should contact their state senator and ask him or her to ask Senator Rhoades, chair of the Senate Education Committee, to let one of those bills out of his committee.

In the meantime, more and more districts are opening up voluntarily because they don't want homeschoolers to enroll in a cyber-charter school just to gain access to school sports. When homeschoolers enroll in a cyber-charter, the school district not only has to let them into school sports, but they also have to pay the cyber-charter school bill! In part because school board members are trying to save money, more districts have been allowing homeschoolers into their sports programs.

For example, Mary Innes of Honesdale reports how she changed her school district's position through a speech which mentioned that she was considering enrollment in the Western Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School. Here are excerpts from her speech to the Wayne Highlands School Board:

First, I would like to thank you for allowing me to come to this meeting this evening.

I am here to request that homeschoolers be allowed to participate in school sports and maybe other co-curricular activities. I have two children who will be in high school next year and who would very much like to participate in school sports. I should say that, I am still deciding exactly which choice of schooling would be best for them: whether to homeschool them, register them in a Cyber Charter School or send them to Honesdale High School. I have been homeschooling for ten years and I am satisfied with this choice so far. My children seem to be doing fine, so I am not leaning towards the latter. While I am of course concerned about my own children, I see this as a local issue and I

definitely have the interests of our whole community at heart. I have lived in this county for more than 17 years and have made it my home....

In 1999-2000 school year 228 school districts in PA allowed homeschoolers to participate in extracurricular activities and, interestingly enough, 222 also allowed them to come to curricular programs too. Since then several more school districts have opened their doors to homeschooled kids, for example our neighbors in Western Wayne. Initially, they had a question about liability insurance but that was easily overcome and didn't seem to pose any great obstacle. Also I spoke with an official from the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletics Association and she said that they have a very open policy regarding the participation of homeschoolers in the State's interscholastic competitions. This is attested to by the number of school districts, which do, in fact, allow homeschool participation....

Although I choose to homeschool my children I do consider myself to be accountable to the local school district for the appropriate education of my children since it (the school district) approves the annual evaluations and test scores. While I am confident that I can provide the academics at home it is obviously impossible for me to provide a soccer team. I am a taxpayer in this district and I feel that we are really talking about what is good for all the kids of our school district without exception.

With the arrival of cyber charter schools and other such choices, things are changing in the world of education. I know that when the current policy was written up our superintendent was concerned with the welfare of the whole school community as he saw it then. I propose that a few years have gone by now and it would not hurt to revise some of those policies to reflect our changing world, especially if it is for the good of the children.

I am thinking of enrolling my children in the Cyber Charter School in Western PA. The problem with that is Wayne Highlands has to pay tuition fees to another school district. This, I realize, would not be advantageous to our district. However, my local school district would be required by law to allow the kids to try out for the sports teams and to participate in co-curricular activities. What is more, there are two bills currently waiting to be voted on in Harrisburg, which will establish equal access to sports participation for homeschoolers. Of course, the outcome of that is unknown but as you can see, the question is here to stay....