

Rep. Fleagle begins new attempt to improve PA Home Education Law

by Howard Richman

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In October, when Rep. Fleagle of Chambersburg PA was running unopposed for his seat in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, a reporter for the local paper asked him about his plans for the upcoming legislative session and he replied, "We're looking at revising a home school education bill. And some cyber school legislation. Those will probably be my big personal thrusts."

On October 18, he introduced a bill (HB 2918), drawn up by Mary Hudzinski, one of his constituents. If it had passed before the legislative session ended in November, it would have made the following significant changes in the PA home education law:

- Parents would not normally have to turn in their portfolios to the school superintendent, just the evaluation letters.
- Parents would not have to turn in objectives with their affidavits.
- The requirement that parents give their children an "appropriate education" would just mean education in the required subjects for the required time, not sustained progress in the overall program.
- Parents with handicapped kids would not have to get a psychologist or a special education teacher to approve their objectives.
- A homeschooling parent with five years of experience would be able to do homeschool evaluations.

On November 17, Rep. Fleagle invited several homeschooling leaders, including myself, to his office in Harrisburg to discuss the changes that we would like to see. At the meeting there was substantial agreement on two of the issues:

1. We would either like to see an end to the superintendent's ability to challenge a positive evaluation or, if that is not possible, that homeschoolers do not have to normally turn in the portfolio, just the evaluation letter. Either of these changes would greatly reduce the friction between homeschoolers and superintendents.
2. We would like to expand the pool of evaluators either by reducing the experience requirement for the teacher who does evaluations or by letting experienced homeschooling parents evaluate.

One issue, however, was quite contentious. Two of those present, Dee Black of HSLDA and Bruce Eagleson of CHAP, wanted to change the portfolio and evaluation language of the law in order to endorse minimal methods. Dee Black asked that the log's daily listing of educational activities be replaced by check marks in an attendance record. Bruce Eagleson asked that a form be added to the law that would encourage evaluators to write the bare minimum. I opposed these changes because our network promotes a thorough

process which both ensures that the homeschooled student is receiving an education and also results in a meaningful evaluation letter.

Rep. Fleagle would like to put together a bill that is backed by a unified homeschooling community. Even if he surmounts the contentious issues dividing homeschoolers, his bill might not be able to pass. The *Akron Beacon Journal* just ran a series of hard-hitting anti-homeschooling articles that are being picked up by other newspapers. These articles dispute studies which show that homeschoolers are doing well academically and socially. They document that some child abusers are homeschooling in order to better hide the abuse, that some racists are homeschooling in order to pass along their racist beliefs, and that some parents who abduct children are homeschooling in order to hide the child. They also document cases in which homeschooling laws have failed. Most damaging of all was this passage describing a case in which a dog in Colorado received a positive evaluation assessment:

Missy's assessment

Nick Campbell of Aurora, Colo., was troubled in 2002 to find that a home-schooled teen-ager in his neighborhood couldn't read but had received satisfactory academic assessments. He decided to see how easily he could get an assessment for his 6-year-old, Missy.

The assessment was conducted by mail. He answered a few questions about Missy, sent along \$25 and waited.

"There never was a word spoken between us," Campbell said of the assessor.

A short time later, an assessor delivered a favorable report to the superintendent of Campbell's school district saying that Missy Campbell was making adequate academic progress.

If the assessor had made one phone call, or asked a probing question, Campbell said, he would have volunteered that Missy is a miniature schnauzer.

Unlike Colorado, Pennsylvania evaluators are required to interview the student. Hopefully this requirement will prevent a repeat of the Missy evaluation here in Pennsylvania. If not, then we would be facing an attempt to tighten, not loosen our home education law.

If Rep. Fleagle can bypass the issues that divide homeschoolers, his legislative effort could improve the homeschool law in Pennsylvania. But he has many problems ahead including a worsening legislative climate due to evidence that some child abusers are homeschooling in order to better hide the abuse, that could lead to more regulation of homeschoolers, not less.