

## **School Sports and Extra Curriculars since the law change...**

*from Carol Lugg, Lockhaven PA*

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With the passage of the Equal Access bill- mandating school districts to lay out the welcome mat for homeschoolers to have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular sports and activities- comes the decision of whether or not this option is right for your family. I have been homeschooling my four children for eleven years in a district that has had an "open door" policy. As a parent, I have had the opportunity to watch my children participate in various school sports and musical groups. As a coach, both at the college and youth sports level, I've had the opportunity to walk around with a clipboard and whistle and feel what it is like on the other side of the field. While homeschoolers might see this law as a mandate for the schools to adjust to us, we too, will have to consider what adjustments we need to make if we choose to knock on the door and whether or not taking a spot on the playing field is worth the effort for our families.

If your family is considering exercising your new option, spend some time weighing the pros and cons of this decision. Perhaps some of these reflections will help with that decision.

Depending on the activity in which your children choose to participate, you may be committing to daily practices. Look over your schedule and think of the adjustments you'll need to make for this new routine, including pre-season practices, practices over school breaks, and the sometimes long bus trips for competitions. For our family this has meant the participant has had to stay home from some field trips or events, while the younger siblings head off for the field trip. We've seen the loss of our off-season vacations. There have been times that I have written a note stating that my son or daughter won't be at practice because they will be attending an education-related activity, but I do so sparingly. I realize that at times the public school students miss practices because of school-related activities, but it really isn't very often. Making this commitment to school-sponsored activities has taken away some of our control over our day-to-day scheduling and flexibility, but the involvement, for the most part, has been a positive experience for my children.

We try to be sensitive to the fact that most schools have an extracurricular policy that if the student is not in school that day or are late to school, the student may not participate or compete on that day. It is difficult for us as homeschoolers to define a school day or even what is being "late" for school. It is not difficult for the public schools to define a day -- you are either in your seat at the prescribed time or you are not. While my children are participating on a team, I do try to be mindful of this requirement. I apply common sense and honesty and do not allow my children to demonstrate a blatant disregard for the policy.

While it is frustrating to drive to the school only to find out that practice has been cancelled, I don't hold the coach responsible for notifying us. If the weather appears iffy for the sport, I'll call the school's main office and ask if there has been a cancellation. Occasionally

we've had a teammate who will remind the coach to call us and sometimes we do have a coach who has the ability to remember to notify us of changes, but I know most of the coaches have had a full day of teaching classes and get busy. I find that when the role is reversed and I am the coach that my usual communication system is email. When a family doesn't use email, I may remember to call, get a busy signal and then forget to call back. I'm pretty forgiving when it comes to this detail, as I understand just how easy it is to forget to call someone in the midst of the other coaching responsibilities.

Playing time is a hot commodity and everyone wants it. Not all public school parents agree that homeschooled students should be allowed to be on the fields taking playing time that their son or daughter should have. I try to be respectful of their opinions and I've noticed that it is usually the parents who have a problem with this issue and not the kids on the field. I've heard other parents remind the naysayer that taxes are paid by every parent who has a player on the team. At times I've heard conversations where misinformation is passed around so I try to diplomatically interject factual information without appearing argumentative. I also try to help build good relationships with the parent groups by attending booster meetings and volunteering to work in concession stands or make the floral bouquets for senior nights. Soon it is forgotten where my kids go to school and the help is appreciated.

When playing time becomes an issue for my children, I encourage them to go to the coach and ask, "What do I need to fix-change-improve-to see more playing time?" I'm not, as the parent, complaining to the coach and creating tension and my student-athlete isn't asking for more playing time. A legitimate question is being asked and the coach ought to be able to answer this question with constructive advice for my player to improve. After we've discussed the advice and my child still doesn't understand what needs to be done, I send them back to ask more specific questions. Coaches have responded very favorably to this respectful dialogue.

Occasionally, since our kids are homeschooled, it does take them a bit of time to jell with the team chemistry and I talk to my children about this before the sport begins. They've grown up playing with these kids in community sports programs, so it hasn't been much of a problem. We have noticed that sports programs that are organized by the public schools at the elementary level tend to be more difficult for my kids to feel comfortable on the team than when the sport is organized as a community sport and kids are placed on teams regardless of where they attend school. Every community will probably differ on the approach for developmental sport programs. We find swimming and track and field seasons are always smooth rides. Everyone participates, everyone knows their talents and abilities, and the stopwatch answers most questions about who should compete and in what position.

Start inquiring early. For fall sports in our district, sign-ups, physicals and all the accompanying paperwork took place this past spring. While your child could probably still register in the fall, help ease the transition by inquiring soon about the process for participation and starting dates. It is not uncommon for fall sports to have pre-season practices start in early August.

A short conversation with the coach at the beginning of the season goes a long way towards creating good relationships. I ask the coach if they want weekly grades and ensure

them that if my child isn't doing the work at home I'm certainly not driving them to practice. I have also asked about eligibility requirements. In our district each coach may determine if they want to have academic expectations that are more rigorous than those required by the PIAA. I inquire about the attendance policy and how the coach would like to be contacted if my child is ill and can't attend practice. Check out the eligibility requirements at <http://www.piaa.org/schools/eligibility/default.aspx> so you know what the expectations are for the rest of the team.

One day at a high school soccer practice, my oldest was talking while the coach was talking and the coach told him to cut the socializing. My son said, "But coach, I'm homeschooled and the whole world worries about my socialization and now you're telling me to stop." Fortunately for my son the coach laughed. I hope my children have been good ambassadors for homeschooling and have helped not only their teammates, but also coaches, understand home-schooling. Explore your options, weigh what you will lose with what you hope to gain, and along the way thank those who worked so hard to get the door open for all homeschoolers.

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SHARE YOUR STORY ABOUT SPORTS & SCHOOL ACTIVITIES! We welcome all readers with experiences in extra-curriculars and sports at their local public school to share their experiences, especially in districts that previously had not allowed such participation. Did the district readily recognize that you could now participate? Did they set policies for implementation if they felt this was needed? How has it gone for your child? For your family as a whole? Any suggestions for others? Thanks! --*Susan Richman, Editor*