



Remarks by Cindy Duckert at the Opening Session of WPA's 17th Annual Home Education Conference on May 6, 2000. Published in *WPA Newsletter #64* - May 2000 pp. 6-8

We are here to learn about homeschooling, but we are also here to celebrate homeschooling. No matter why we begin, homeschooling soon becomes a way we live. Homeschooling is more than just a choice of location for learning. It is family life. It is learning all the time, in all places and under all conditions. Homeschooling is about family control of our family life. Our concern with the homeschooling law is thus about the role our government takes in our families

I see homeschooling as having retained my responsibilities as a parent-as someone who has not delegated my children's academic education to others. Like all choices, what is best for one family will not fit the needs and values of others. How fortunate we are to have a society that does not require educational conformity.

The law does not care why you homeschool. But when we think about how the law affects us, we need to remember that it affects others with different needs and reasons. In thinking about homeschooling laws around the country, I found two areas where it most adversely impacted families: the issues of time and of testing and approval.

The Arkansas and Kentucky laws limit when you can begin to homeschool. There is a requirement that you file your intent to homeschool within two weeks of the beginning of the school semester-or wait until the next semester. Oh, too bad for those who wish to pull their children from school and start homeschooling precipitously. Too bad, but it wouldn't affect my family even if this were true in Wisconsin. Then consider the attitudes laid out by a school calendar.

A school's institutional time table does not drive our family's schedule-when we wake and eat and sleep, or when we have to be home from an outside activity to meet the one returning from school. We left town to visit Gettysburg in September while the weather was good but the crowds were back in school.

We can homeschool on the calendar of our own choosing, each family deciding this for itself. The person next to you chooses to use that of the parochial school where her children's best friends attend so that they can have the same days off. You can go six weeks on, two weeks off year round while my family learns every evening from 7 to 11 and those folks behind you have decided that everyday is a learning day.

It was only when I began thinking about this talk that I realized that our freedom from outside schedules is personally important. We are all only a slip of the foot away from disaster. Five years I stepped onto black ice, flipped up and landed on my head. Life changed in an instant. Driving, speech, vision, comprehension, and so on and so forth-traumatic brain

damage seemed insurmountable. Friends whose children were in conventional schools said, “Aw, now you'll have to enroll your children in school.” Homeschooling friends knew better and said, “Thank goodness you're homeschooling.” For eight long months, while I slept 12 to 18 hours a day, our curriculum consisted of household management and brain physiology. We slowly resumed our routine. Many things are better now, but some deficits are permanent. At no time did our yearly commitment to 875 hours of a sequentially progressive curriculum miss its target. Could that have happened in a state where we were tied to some governmental timetable?

My husband Bruce and I chose to homeschool in the first place because we felt that we wanted our children to have more control over when, how, or on what to learn. In school, tests are used to evaluate what was learned and then, mistakes or not, holes in understanding or not, the class moves on. In our homeschool, we can spend as much or as little time as needed to master any particular subject to our standards. Outside school I have learned that success comes not from avoiding failure or getting it all right on the first try. I triumph from continuous, successive actions, picking myself up from mistakes and working onward.

Meeting families from other states, I am continually struck when people speak of having evaluators look over portfolios as “not much interference” or having to test “only” every other year.

The mother that has made the deepest impression is from New York state. That state has some of the most intrusive laws in the U.S. AND the county AND the local school district can add to these. The NY family has to supply quarterly reports in each of up to 12 subject areas for each child. Testing is mandatory at certain grades. Detailed descriptions of curriculum and lesson plans must to be submitted for approval-approval that has been withheld for such infractions as not including her telephone number. Tears welled up as she explained that she spent more energy complying than she did working with her children. To think that I frequently grumble about our official attendance record!

Mandatory standardized tests assume that learning can be tested. Further, it assumes learning occurs in specific topics of particular subjects at some exact age. A father from another state told me how he coped with the required fourth grade tests for his late reader-on the state forms he “held” his son back to repeat third grade-and then “found” so much progress was made that year that the following year he registered his son in fifth grade.

What purpose do statewide tests serve anyway? The law requires school attendance, not learning. Such tests report to parents about their children's academic performance, to the administration about the teacher's performance, and to the funding agencies, that is the taxpayers, about how their monies are spent. I am the parent and the administration and the funding agency.

One of the reasons we homeschooled was the fear that our son Dan would do too well in school. He plunged into subjects and drank them up, surfacing weeks or months later. We worried that his thirst for knowledge would be drowned, diverted or sated with sugar water. At a deeper level, I worried would my child, as I had, base choices of friends on which read-

ing group he was in? It took me until college to have compassion and to value others on character and not IQ test results. By the time we had attended a few WPA conferences, we found that no matter how or why the parents choose homeschooling, the children were capable and interesting people.

Yet today we find ourselves in an odd position. Dan is interested in a university, a private university in Pennsylvania. The homeschooling laws in Pennsylvania are a gauntlet of evaluation. The university's expectation of what homeschoolers need to provide in the way of records in a transcript reflects the requirements of that state. This decision to consider a private Pennsylvanian university is our choice, but a choice that has already impacted our record keeping style. What is studied has not changed, but how it is learned has—all because now we have an outside agency to propitiate. Is trigonometry being studied at the “right” age? Is learning world history over this time period “appropriate”? We never had to consider such artificial questions before, and now face assumptions based on another state's laws.

As homeschooling parents, we have time to reflect on our ultimate goals. We have time to accept and acknowledge what each of our children needs to grow intellectually, physically, and spiritually.

How do I know how well they are doing? If I choose, I can arrange for standardized tests. I have sometimes asked for an informal evaluation by my father, a retired educator. For me, the questions that Dan and Ben ask say a lot about what they understand. When one asks, “How many words are there in English?” or the other asks, “Why are all the Noble elements gases?” I get a pretty good idea of how they are relating that knowledge to their understanding of the rest of the world.

The questions I want my children to be able to answer are the questions they raise themselves. Can they determine that they know enough for their own needs? Can they trust their own assessments without having to call in some outside expert? Do they know how and where to find more information if they need it? And can they learn that ignorance is not the same as stupidity?

Maybe, somewhere along the way, they'll learn wisdom.

My homeschooling friend Miranda wrote at age eleven: “Freedom means you can have your own thoughts without having to tell anyone what they are . . . But freedom also means that every choice you make has a consequence . . .”

My children were not yet born when the current Wisconsin laws were enacted in 1984. I thank each of the families who forged a group that could work together no matter why or how each family chose to homeschool. I greatly appreciate the patient hours they spent enabling our homeschooling law to pass. The legacy given my family allows us to proceed in the ways most meaningful to our needs and beliefs. Thank you.

But we cannot rest on their laurels. The New York law replaced an older and now easier law. We need to continue to monitor our local school boards and our legislature. Each of us is able to contribute information about our local situations to the WPA newsletter: articles from our local newspapers about truancy or copies of letters the local officials send to home-

schoolers in their districts. Meeting with our state senators and assembly members to explain how well the law serves us is best done when there are no fires raging. We can always take the easiest way out and contribute money so that WPA can work up to a budget on a shoestring.

We must never forget Jefferson's words: "Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom."

It is in educating ourselves about the complicated legal issues that arise and then speaking out that we will maintain our easy-to-live-with law. The school district administration in my own town has an individual who dislikes homeschoolers and whose actions try to erode our rights. This spring, he sent a registered letter to a new member of my homeschool group, a family that has just moved here from out west. In it he said that the application to homeschool needed additional information before it could be approved. They needed to call his office immediately. The parents were not rattled, much.

The mother consulted the WPA handbook to see just what they needed to report for a school census. Then she read the law itself. No, it was not fun to read. Yes, it takes a while to read and understand. Yet the more she read, the more clearly she knew her legal foundation, the angrier she got at this upstart. She wrote back, not phoned. She corrected that the PI-1206 form is a notification of intent and not an application, that no approval was needed, that some of the information will come on the annual school district census, and that most of it is not required by any law or regulation. Another member of the group is checking to see what letter, if any, is sent to families who enroll in one of the conventional private schools midyear. Conserving our rights continues each day and in a thousand places.

In Wisdom of the Sands, Antoine de St. Exupery writes:

Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to them their heritage. If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder. Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys. We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation. ❖

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