

Vulnerability of Virginia Homeschooling Laws and What You Can Do

by Peg Watson, Crozet

Each winter the Virginia General Assembly convenes to consider changes to the Code of Virginia, thus creating a window of vulnerability for our state homeschooling laws. A variety of parties propose bills that are written, considered, amended, and killed or passed very hurriedly. Members of the Virginia Senate and House of Representatives must deal with a multitude of bills each session, which number into the thousands.

Because the Virginia legislative process progresses very quickly, imminent detection of bills impacting homeschooling is necessary. Homeschoolers in Virginia are very fortunate to have the Legislative Committee from Virginia Home Education Association working literally day and night during the session on this effort. Each year bills are discovered which are potentially dangerous to the homeschooling freedoms we currently hold. There are also bills of possible benefit to homeschoolers. The homeschooling parents who volunteer their time as VHEA lobbyists have often been successful in convincing patron legislators to amend or withdrawal negative bills. Other times more support is necessary from homeschoolers throughout the state to amend or defeat an adverse bill or to increase the prospects of a favored bill.

Just in time for the 2000 General Assembly session is the brand new VHEA-announce Email list. This new forum will provide a cost-free method for VHEA to convey time sensitive announcements to members, including legislative alerts regarding proposed legislation with significance to homeschooling. Announcements will be emailed to all VHEA members who have provided an email address. If you would like to be on the list, send a blank e-mail to [updated address: VaHomeschoolers-announce@yahogroups.com]. To utilize email effectively for legislative alerts, it is necessary to check email at least daily while the General Assembly is in session.

As in previous years, when committee scheduling of proposed bills is relaxed enough to allow postal mailing, VHEA will mail legislative bulletins. They will now be sent to members not having email access and those specifically requesting postal mail in addition to or in lieu of email.

After reading a legislative alert, consider how the proposed bill could impact homeschoolers. Granted, legislation under consideration often times is only relevant to a segment of Virginia homeschoolers, such as those filing under option iv (who have no degree), or perhaps those homeschooling kindergartners, or those with teenagers desiring a driving license, etc. While one year the issues may not directly effect your situation, another year they may and continuity of support among homeschoolers to maintain or increase rights can create the best long-term results for all.

When the situation warrants, your prompt personal calls to your own legislators can make a critical difference. Because of the rapid pace of the Virginia General Assembly, letter writing during the session, even a message sent via email, is generally so ineffective as to be a waste of your time. Legislators do, however, keep tabs on the number of telephone calls recorded in their office expressing support for or opposition to specific bills. The General Assembly Constituent Hotline (toll free) telephone number is (800) 889-0229. The toll-free number is available when the General Assembly is in session. Your phone message is noted then relayed to the appropriate legislator. However, the fastest and most reliable way to convey your thoughts on a bill is usually by calling the legislator's office directly or via the switchboard and speaking to a secretary or aide. The telephone number for the General Assembly switchboard is (804) 698-1500. The individual office numbers have not been published as of this writing, but the switchboard can readily connect you to the office of the delegate or senator. Be brief, friendly, and to the point. Legislators do not appreciate receiving calls from people who are not in their own districts. If you don't know for certain who your delegate and senator are, do contact your local voter registrar's office and find out now.

In addition to calling your legislators, consider passing the alert along to another homeschooling family or other interested person. Increasing awareness in this manner could be achieved by passing on a paper copy of the alert so that no details are overlooked or accidentally skewed or through a telephone call. Either way you will be providing a helpful service to others.

If you would like to financially support VHEA's efforts in protecting our state homeschooling laws, donations of any amount may be mailed to VHEA, PO Box 5131, Charlottesville, VA 29905. Sending a donation will help to cover the actual costs incurred by VHEA's volunteer legislative committee. While everyone strives to keep expenses at a minimum, the sum still adds up with parking for one lobbyist in Richmond for one day costing as much as \$15.

With awareness and information, your individual family can consider the issues and take action to help control the vulnerability of our state homeschooling laws.

Originally published in the Jan-Feb 2000 issue of the VHEA Newsletter. ©2000, 2004 The Organization of Virginia Homeschoolers. All rights reserved.