

Handling It Ourselves

New homeschoolers understandably worry about meeting state requirements and interacting with division superintendents. Even veterans may feel intimidated by the presumed authority of the school officials with whom they necessarily have contact. This apparently was the case with an experienced homeschooling mom who called me in mid-July, wanting to know whether I had already “asked permission” to homeschool this year. Shocked at hearing that term from a seasoned Virginia homeschooler, I uttered the refrain I repeat on discussion lists, via email over the phone and in person: “We are not asking permission to homeschool; we are notifying the superintendent that we are homeschooling.”

The following day a mom on the [VAEclecticHS statewide discussion list](#) put her finger on the crux of the problem when she wrote, “The school system did its job on me. I’m afraid to question their authority!” This is maybe the reason that many homeschooling parents – full-fledged adults – feel intimidated in the face of school officials. Those old feelings return – the same that arose when we received the threat of being sent to the principal’s office. Kafkaesque specters of interrogation and a sense of impending danger may also haunt us. Being aware of this, we can choose to empower ourselves by knowing the law, by providing only legally required materials and by learning from, and joining with, other homeschooling parents. Through these measures we can face our fears and respond confidently and appropriately when dealing with school officials who may ask for more than the law requires.

When homeschoolers provide more information than required by the [Virginia Home Instruction statute](#), the superintendents can become used to the additional materials, and start asking for them from others, unwittingly creating the perceived need for “legal protection.” It is a vicious cycle. As children we learned to fear school officials’ powers. When we homeschool, they present themselves as the authority, through the use of such phrases as “requesting permission to homeschool” on their documents. We are afraid, so we give them whatever they want without examining whether the request is in alignment with the law – hoping they’ll leave us alone. But doing so simply shows the officials that we are compliant, and they ask for more because we’ve demonstrated that we’ll give them whatever they want. They continue to ask for more, we feel threatened, and we think we are incapable of stopping the cycle without intervention from an organization.

But, we homeschooling parents are our own best protection. It isn’t necessary to call in lawyers and conjure visions of lawsuits when a school district requests more than the law requires. Most superintendents are reasonable and are just trying to do their job to the best of their ability. They may simply be unmotivated to learn the complexities and details of our murky home education statutes. With a little support and encouragement from each other, homeschoolers can effectively respond to superintendents’ offices that overstep their bounds.

Some groups encourage homeschoolers to submit the tables of contents of books when filing a “description of the program of study.” My county, Prince William, has been asking homeschoolers to provide the tables of contents of books, which is beyond what the law requires. I responded with a simple, cordial letter stating that I had read the law and saw no provision for

what they asked. However, if they could point out the specific wording of the law that required me to provide what they ask for, I would be happy to comply. Of course they couldn't furnish wording to back up their request, and they sent the so-called "approval" letter a few days later. This year they did not ask me for more than the law requires, because I stood up for myself the year before.

Other local parents also responded effectively. In a few cases the county's response was to say the papers wouldn't be processed until the "required" items were submitted. But these homeschoolers were not waiting for that "approval" letter; they did what the law requires, and if the county fails to process the papers, that is the county's choice. When homeschoolers handle the small encounters themselves we prevent them from snowballing into more serious difficulties. By dealing directly with our local school divisions, we avoid falling into being dependent upon an organization to take care of us. We can retain our individual power and autonomy and demonstrate that homeschoolers are confident, polite and proactive, rather than fearful and aggressively reactive.

Issues such as these are often discussed on state and local homeschool e-mail lists, where members can ask for help and learn the nuances of dealing with education officials. One member of the statewide list wrote that she found her county's erroneous form "rather intimidating," and that, had she "not been on this list" and learned otherwise, she "would have believed" the county form was accurate.

Through individual courage and commitment to providing only what the law requires, we protect our homeschooling rights. It is in our best interest to claim that responsibility on an individual level as much as we can, and to encourage others to do the same.

A new homeschooler, filing for her first time, confessed to me that she is "not fearless, like you are." But I am not fearless. Rather, I vowed, after a bad experience years ago, to avoid taking action based on fear. I still am afraid at times, but I face my fear, utilize the resources available, and trust that everything will turn out all right. And it has.

Note: Nothing in this article is meant as legal advice. For legal matters, contact a competent attorney.

Interacting with the School Division:

- Read your state law and ask questions of knowledgeable people until you understand the law well
- Keep a copy of the current Virginia Home Instruction statute on hand
- Answer superintendents' queries in a timely manner
- Respond politely and confidently
- Communicate with school officials in writing and keep copies of all papers, so you have documentation of all exchanges
- Consider sending mail certified with return receipt as proof of compliance
- Seek information and support from other homeschool parents in a local support group or discussion list, before looking for an organization to act on your behalf

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