

Reluctant Homeschoolers

by Leslie Moyer

If the calls I receive from new homeschoolers are any indication, the number of "reluctant" homeschoolers is on the rise. When I speak with other homeschool telephone helpers, that observation seems to be confirmed.

Who are these 'reluctant' homeschoolers? Many of them are families whose kids have missed many days of school (truant) because of illness (some seemingly CAUSED by the stressful environment of school itself) or boredom. Others have been kicked out because of some trouble they've gotten into. Still others are "drop-outs" who have no desire to continue attending school. By my definition, they are parents/families who don't really want to homeschool, but the system offers them very few choices.

These kinds of kids have always been around, of course. It seems, however, as homeschooling becomes more visible, many of these families are recognizing the benefit to their families to identify themselves as "homeschoolers." As more families choose this option, the public schools are paying more attention. Many cite the "Shane Coffman" case as the impetus for Oklahoma politicians and media to take a closer look at homeschooling.

Members of the homeschool community have recognized this phenomena and questions about certain aspects of it have recently come up. How might it affect other homeschoolers? What is the homeschooling community's responsibility, if any, to these families?

First, I believe with all my heart that simply getting OUT of school is a step in the right direction for many of these kids. Getting them out of the environment that is causing many of their problems is all many of these kids need to begin to become "whole people" again. What is mandatory and compulsory for these kids is "attendance"--NOT "education." They might be forced to sit in a classroom for seven hours a day, but they cannot be forced to learn. Simply getting them out of that forced attendance situation can lead them to other *choices* about their lives that can get them back on a positive track.

Homeschooling brings families together. Most "public-school pull-outs" comment on how their family life is immediately enhanced by the fact they aren't dealing with the stress of formal school anymore. Coupled with the additional time they spend together, homeschooling is usually a "healing" process for families.

Another important idea is that the law requires the state to provide an education to all children. *IF* they want to stay in school, it may be their legal right to do so. An attorney's guidance would be helpful to a family with such a desire.

The Oklahoma State Dept. of Education has an "Alternative Schools" department that is actively working to get more "alternative education" programs added. A friendly, helpful contact person at that office would be: Mary Meritt (405)522-0276. After May, they expect to have a total of 279 such programs available to Oklahoma students. (Up from 179 last year.) Alternative Schools are for "kids at risk of not receiving a diploma." This includes lots of different situations-- kids who are bored, not thriving, pregnant, drop-outs, troubled kids, etc.

If these families DO choose homeschooling, what is the homeschool community's responsibility to them? Some politicians, home school legal defense associations, and other homeschoolers have

suggested that in order for the rest of us to remain "untarnished" by "illegitimate" homeschoolers, some regulation/supervision may be necessary. In other states, there has been legislation passed (with the HELP of homeschool organizations) that requires homeschool families to be monitored by homeschool organizations or the public school system. That idea has recently been discussed in Oklahoma as well. I am adamantly opposed to such supervision.

As I interpret the law, a family that is not really homeschooling (but saying they are to avoid truancy charges) is, in fact, breaking the *current* laws we have addressing homeschooling. No additional laws are needed to regulate such homeschoolers. Such laws, if passed, would dramatically impact the freedoms of ALL Oklahoma homeschoolers. (Please note: no such legislation is currently addressing this issue--there is only discussion.)

If we agree that we don't have a responsibility to supervise these reluctant homeschoolers, what *are* our responsibilities regarding them?

I believe we have no legal responsibility *for* them whatsoever. Law-abiding individuals have every right to live free under the Constitution. If they break the law, (though the burden of proof is on the STATE) they may suffer the consequences as individuals as well. However, it is in our best interests (as a member of society and as homeschoolers) to assist them in whatever ways we can.

Of these initial "reluctant" homeschoolers, some of them will choose to continue a pattern of truancy, while others will *thrive* in the homeschooling environment. Either way, my belief is that these kids will, for the most part, be better off than they would be in a traditional classroom. Here are a few ideas that I have about helping them:

1. **Help make the state law available to them.** Oklahoma laws related to homeschooling are accessible in many places. Our new Oklahoma Homeschooling Handbook provides a concise, accurate summary of those laws. (To order, send \$6 to HERO, 302 N. Coolidge, Enid, OK 73703.) If your local library doesn't already have a copy of our Handbook, consider donating one. The complete text of the law is also available at most public libraries and online at the OK State Dept. of Education web site:

<http://www.sde.state.ok.us/law/law.html>.

2. **Try the non-traditional.** Many of these families will not be helped by traditional homeschooling suggestions. I often suggest books such as The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How To Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education or Real Lives: The Story of Eleven Teenagers Who Don't Go To School -- both by Grace Llewellyn. (Great books!) Sometimes a "correspondence school" option works well for these families.

3. **Direct them to the Alternative Schools Department.** Though that department may or may not be able to help, that is the reason they exist. Utilizing this resource might help the public schools realize this is *their* responsibility--not one of the homeschool community.

4. **Stress the positive.** While we don't want to be misleading about homeschooling's benefits, helping families find the positive aspects of their situation can help them over the initial confusion and doubt. I don't see it as my role to "give permission to" or "judge" *any* homeschooling family. I also don't see my role as one of "cheerleader." I try, simply, to put families in touch with information (including their legal responsibilities), resources, and ideas that will help them in THEIR choices. To attach MY values to their choices doesn't benefit either one of us--it is just condescending and patriarchal.

One final thought on this topic: Speak up for yourself. If you don't want other groups to speak *for* you, you must speak up. If this issue takes wings and makes it to the legislature in some

form, let your senator and representative know your feelings about it. If you're not sure of your feelings, talk with other homeschool families about it.

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