

On Jumping Through Hoops

by Helen Hegener

Most books and articles on home education are quick to point out that homeschooling is legal, in one form or another, in all fifty states. Parents might have to jump through more hoops in one state than in another, but as long as they're willing to jump through those hoops they're allowed to teach their own children at home.

These hoops might include testing, presenting curricula for approval, keeping portfolios, teaching for a specific number of hours in a day, meeting with certified teachers, and various other forms of control. Are these hoops really necessary?

There is a conviction in this country that laws, rules, and regulations are centrally important to maintaining proper social stability. And there is a certainty that laws are necessary to keep "everyone else" from running amok. People who would decry the need for yet another law will also argue the necessity of ensuring that other people behave responsibly. "Legislating thy neighbor" has become a popular approach to living together in this country, and those with the most financial resources to gain adherents to their cause have generally prevailed in the legislative process.

The current homeschooling laws in this country are, at best, a poor compromise between a highly complex, two hundred billion dollar a year industry and the beliefs and principles of a handful of parents. Of those parents, the majority simply welcome the opportunity to homeschool their children and will jump through whatever hoops the Department of Education insists upon. For the most part, these are the same parents who are writing compromises into homeschooling laws. They don't question the state's motives for enacting regulations and accountability measures, much less its interest in determining what constitutes education.

Educational policy in this country is the result of many years of lobbying by powerful education interests, whose dedication is not to children so much as to protecting jobs, increasing benefits, and ensuring political clout. Schools are the foremost tools of social engineering. Gene I. Maeroff, education writer for the New York Times, cautions, "Make no mistake. Schools have been viewed by Congress primarily as instruments of social change."

The benevolent teacher imparting knowledge to children has been replaced with a combination of psychological goals and restructured intellectual objectives. Schools have become the primary agency for eliminating social ills in this country, and for developing personal integrity and the national character. It has been a masterstroke to veil this design with an inspired long-term public relations campaign that has turned parents into staunch allies by proclaiming that "Education is the key to 'The Good Life!'"

The idea of education as a method of control is not advertised as such, and most people simply think that teaching children to read and write and work with numbers is a good idea, which, of course, it is. This benevolent image has led to unquestioned support behind education in this country from many quarters, and yet our schools are in trouble, fighting to maintain their hard won appearances. While the nose-dive in American education is an inability to continue making the social engineering palatable, it is being attributed to a loss of authority, and the most common reaction to a loss of authority is more authority, more control.

What then of those parents who choose to stand in the face of these dictates and assume responsibility for educating their own children? As long as all of the proper hoops are observed and leapt through, homeschooling parents can rattle around between laws and regulations and this is called freedom to educate our children. But many parents find these hoops altogether intolerable. In *Homeschooling for Excellence* (Warner Books, 1988) David and Micki Colfax wrote, "Homeschooling parents can ignore what are for the most part government directives as to what shall be taught and when. Rather, parents and children can work together to develop courses of study that address immediate and long-term needs, interests, and capabilities

in the context of what they, and not a bureaucracy of decidedly dubious credibility, deem important and necessary."

They can, but in many states such action will bring them into conflict with the law--and with their peers. Too frequently homeschooling "leaders" are briskly admonishing parents who might upset their apple carts by not complying with homeschooling laws and regulations. Civil disobedience in educational matters has become a form of heresy in many support groups, and expulsion for noncompliance is acceptable practice.

Parents who find themselves caught between following the law and doing what they consider best for their children are faced with disapproval and outright condemnation from fellow homeschoolers. Why the intolerance? Fear is a strong motivating factor: fear of a loss of control on the part of the homeschooling support groups and leaders, which could potentially lead to a loss of memberships, or newsletter subscribers, or conference and workshop fees. Fear of a loss of control of others, the old "legislate thy neighbor" attitude. Fear of retribution by authorities in the form of stricter legislation or regulations. Fear of a loss of external control: a recurring theme in many homeschooling newsletters is gratitude for the laws and regulations which guide parents in their homeschooling. Fear that one wouldn't "measure up" if homeschoolers were actually allowed to make their own decisions about education.

A few years ago, after successfully passing homeschool legislation, a major publicity campaign was launched by a large state organization with the slogan, "Homeschooling is Legal and It Works!" A catchy phrase, but I've often wondered if that group could have even considered spreading a slogan before the law was passed, something along the lines of "Homeschooling is Illegal, But It Works Anyway!" Not very likely. To be out of compliance with the law is to be labeled a radical, a reactionary, a rebel.

What seems to escape even the most thoughtful homeschooler is the fact that, at some point in time, someone had to challenge the law and homeschool their kids. No doubt they did so illegally. No doubt they were radical, reactionary, and rebellious. But without that first purposeful step, none of us would be homeschooling our children today--legally or otherwise. We need to look down the road to ten or fifteen years from now and try to imagine what the homeschooling atmosphere will be like then. Will homeschooling families enjoy the freedom to simply live with their children? Or will homeschooling have by then become a bureaucratic nightmare, with volumes of regulations and guidelines? The choice is ours.