

Early Education in WV

If you're like our family, you probably have little interest in sending your four year old child away to public school. But like us, you may also have friends or acquaintances with young children who are interested in the concept of homeschooling, but are waiting to make the decision. If that is the case, here is some information you may want to pass along to them.

One important point to know is that **enrollment in early childhood educational programs is not mandatory**. According to State law, compulsory attendance for a child does not have to begin until the school year in which the sixth birthday is reached prior to the first day of September.

While there is some ambiguity in the law, it is possible that some counties will no longer consider attendance to be voluntary once a child enrolls in a publically supported kindergarten or pre-kindergarten program. (This is especially true given that their funding is directly tied to enrollment.) Let's say that a family enrolls their 4 year old in their county's pre-K program, and then after a week decides it was a bad idea. A county superintendent or attendance director might take the position that the parents can't just withdraw the child from school and wait another year to decide what they want to do. The parent could then try to convince the teacher and school principal to agree that "the best interest of the child would not be served by requiring further attendance... provided that the principal shall make the final determination" (18-8-1a). If that doesn't work, it appears that the law would require the family to qualify for an exemption from compulsory attendance by either attending a private school or receiving home instruction – prior to withdrawing enrollment from the public school system.

If they decide to homeschool, they must file a "Notice of Intent to Provide Home Instruction" with the county superintendent at least two weeks prior to withdrawing the child from public school. The parents would then need to provide some sort of formal home instruction over the next two years, and most likely have a portfolio of the child's work reviewed by a certified teacher (since no standardized test is available for this age), then submit the evaluation to the county superintendent. **This amounts to two years of burdensome requirements that could have been completely avoided if they had simply stayed out of the system to begin with.** (We should note that no complaints of such problems as described above have been brought to the CHEWV board's attention.)

It is also important to know the possible ramifications of staying out of the public school system until the sixth birthday, and then deciding to enroll in the public system. State law requires that prior to entering first grade in a public school, a child must have completed a "state-approved" kindergarten program. The only exception to this requirement - allowed "only under extraordinary circumstances to be determined by the board" - is the successful completion of an entrance test approved by the county. So it is likely that their six year old child would simply enter kindergarten – with a little more physical, emotional, and cognitive maturity than he would have had a year earlier.

We at CHEWV encourage Christian parents to seriously and prayerfully consider the option of home education (or as we like to say "home discipleship") in light of *what God desires* our children to be and to become. The information above is offered to make parents aware of some of the West Virginia laws that may affect their educational choice for their pre-school age young children. It is not a substitute for the law or for reading the law. Some individual counties may or may not offer more flexibility than is outlined above. Always remain aware that the county has a vested interest in steering you away from homeschool and into the public school system.

Interestingly, one finding used by the State as justification for expansion of early childhood education programs is that as school enrollment in West Virginia declines, county boards will continue to seek to enroll four-year old students to offset the declining enrollments "because of the dynamics of the state aid formula" (18-5-44(b)(7)). It is clear that counties are seeking to enroll younger children into the public system for financial reasons. Massive funding from the federal government is used as a carrot to encourage local systems to adopt federal policies. At the county, state, and national levels, the movement towards earlier compulsory attendance is growing each year.

Take the time to talk with your elected representatives, and those currently running for office. Let them know that you homeschool. Encourage them to work to ensure that the freedom for parents to homeschool is protected whenever educational programs are being expanded. Ask them to consider whether “more of the same” will really fix the systemic problems in public education, and have plenty of positive homeschool statistics and stories to share with them. (The National Home Education Research Institute – nheri.org – is a good source of statistics on homeschool.) Homeschool Day at the Capitol is also a great opportunity to touch base state your legislators during the annual Legislative Session.