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Illinois home schoolers free of regulation

By Jim Nowlan

An estimated 4,000 home school advocates descended on the state Capitol in Springfield one day this past March to protest a bill that would simply have required home school students to be registered with the state board of education. Under this intense pressure, bill sponsor and state Sen. Ed Maloney (D-Chicago) withdrew the bill, but said he would keep discussing his concern about “kids who fall through the cracks of home schooling.”

Numbers of home school students in the U.S. increased an estimated 74 percent between 1999 and 2007, to 1.5 million, or 3 percent of all school students, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. “Estimated” it has to be, as Illinois and several other states don’t really know the numbers, because of the lack of a registration requirement.

Indeed, Illinois is one of the least restrictive states when it comes to home schooling. State statutes are completely silent on the matter, and courts have ruled that home schooling is a form of private school.

Parents who choose to home school in Illinois are required to meet the criteria of private schools: to teach in English the branches of education taught in the public schools. Parents decide on their pedagogical approach, and their students are not required to be tested.

Neighboring Iowa requires that parents of home-schoolers file an annual “Competent Private Instruction” form that includes an “outline of course of study” and whether they will home school under a “supervising teacher” or an “annual assessment” option. The supervising teacher must be certified and makes periodic visits to the home; under this option, no testing is required. Under the latter option, annual testing and proof of adequate progress is required.

Clearly, such requirements would send well-organized Illinois home educators ballistic.

With significant numbers now home schooling, the public issue is: Does the state have a public responsibility in what many consider a private, family matter?

After all, until the 1800s, education was wholly a family matter; there were no public schools. Then American states determined that there was a public responsibility to see that all youngsters were offered a free, public education, for the good of the larger society.

The home educators I know do an apparently excellent job. They are intelligent, committed, disciplined and draw upon a wealth of resources available now to home educators. For example, the Rainbow Resources catalog for home educators now runs to 1,300 pages and 40,000 items.

Home-schooled students can go at their own pace and benefit from one-on-one instruction. If a child has a fascination with, say, the Titanic sinking, the parent educator can go into depth on the topic, incorporating science, English, math and history.

Home educators often take advantage of collaboration with other home schoolers, engaging in such activities as small group cooperative sessions on topics where one

parent may be an expert. In my territory, the Association of Peoria Area Christian Home Educators (APACHE) provides extensive networking and support to its members, group socialization activities for the youngsters, and voluntary testing.

The leading reasons for deciding to home educate are: 1) a concern about the school environment (88 percent of home educators surveyed in 2007); 2) a desire to provide religious or moral instruction (83 percent), and 3) dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at other schools (73 percent).

Home schooling isn't for everyone. It is a daunting responsibility, and it takes lots of focused time, and some money. A family can spend from almost nothing up to \$5,000 for curricular materials, according to a home educator friend of mine.

“If a parent is good at providing structure, great,” says this same friend, “but if not then private or public schooling might be better for your youngsters.”

“Why,” I ask my friend, “are home educators so adamantly opposed to simply registering that their children are being home educated?”

“It represents government poking itself into our lives,” she responded. “Soon government would be adding regulations and restrictions.”

Nor are children in Catholic, Lutheran or other private schools in Illinois required to register with the state.

In the right situations, home schooling can provide significant advantages over the public school. But I commend Sen. Maloney to keep talking with home educators and others about whether and how the state should monitor “those who fall through the cracks.”