

Homeschooling with Integrity

Remarks from this year's opening ceremonies by WPA President and Issues Director Pamela Roland

I have been volunteering for WPA for the past 9 years and, over time, I've had the chance to get to know so many dedicated homeschoolers. From the founding families of WPA, to homeschoolers that are just getting started, I have come to realize that committing to the endeavor of homeschooling takes a great deal of courage and a great deal of integrity.

Before 1984, parents living in Wisconsin, who chose to educate their children at home, faced disapproval and intervention from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, the educational establishment, and even their own neighbors.

Before 1984, families could be charged with truancy and faced stiff fines and jail time for pursuing homeschooling. When all of this came to a head, legislation was drafted specifically addressing homeschooling. If that legislation had been passed as it was originally written, homeschooling in Wisconsin would be very different than it is today. At the time, homeschooling families came together and decided that they would fight restrictive legislation, knowing that educating their children according to their own principles and beliefs worked and that they wanted the freedom to do just that, without excessive state oversight.

They came together as the Wisconsin Parents Association. Some of those families are here tonight, continuing to support homeschooling freedom in Wisconsin.

Our Conference theme this year is "Homeschooling with Integrity." One of the definitions of "integrity" is the state of being whole and undivided. This group decided early on that being undivided was the only way to stand against the powerful educational establishment and win a homeschooling law that provided freedom for all homeschoolers.

Those who had teaching certificates agreed that they would not accept a law that required teaching certificates for homeschooling parents.

Those who used a specific curriculum agreed that they would not accept a law that required approval of curriculum.

Those who thought their children would do well on standardized tests agreed that they would not accept a law that required standardized testing.

And so on.

These parents knew that they were taking a risk and yet, they stood undivided in their agreement that none would compromise, but instead that they would stand firm for the freedom of all homeschoolers. Because these homeschooling families, working through WPA, fought for our current law and then, even after it passed, fought each time legislation or public policy arose that would threaten it, we are all here today.

We still have to be brave to choose homeschooling, but it is a lot easier because of what these families did more than 30 years ago. Our families don't have to stay indoors with the curtains drawn during school hours. There isn't a chance, that on the whim of someone from the DPI, our family could be denied the right to homeschool. We have no idea of the terrifying feeling of getting a knock at the door from a public official that might be calling into question the legality of what we are doing. We have a law that says, that as long as we are in legal compliance with the few very reasonable requirements, we have protection to educate our children according to our own principles and beliefs.

In so many of other states, homeschooling doesn't look like it does in Wisconsin. Homeschoolers in our neighboring states are required to provide such things as annual reporting, standardized testing, and education for their children that is "substantially similar to public or private schools in their district of residence." In states further away, parents may need to get permission from their school district to homeschool, approval of their curriculum, a teaching certificate or a college degree.

Each year or two, we face challenges to our freedom to homeschool in the way in which we have become accustomed. Because of WPA, homeschoolers don't hear about many of those challenges, because they are defused before they can change the way we homeschool.

I've come to realize, however, that enough time has passed since 1984, that many homeschoolers in the state aren't aware of the history of homeschooling in Wisconsin and don't seem to understand that unless we stand together, things could change. One bill or one amendment to a bill, could change homeschooling in Wisconsin. Without this memory, some homeschoolers think that because they hear nothing, there is no challenge. The homeschooling community has forgotten that there was a time in Wisconsin that homeschooling was a risky thing to do.

Today, I'd like to thank the founders of WPA who, with integrity and courage, didn't settle for a homeschooling law that divided homeschoolers, but that protected, for each and every one of us, the ability to educate our children according to our own principles and beliefs.

And I'd like to ask something from all of you. Homeschool responsibly, in gratitude for what these families have worked so hard for, thinking about what is best for all Wisconsin homeschoolers and acting accordingly.

And, join WPA as an active member and encourage others to do the same. WPA is committed to preserving the good homeschooling law in Wisconsin.

You were brave enough to choose homeschooling, now be brave enough to help us preserve it. WPA only continues as long as there are members who understand the value of what we have and what it would mean if we lost it.

Anytime WPA representatives meet with legislators, the first question the legislators ask is, "How many people does your organization represent?" We have to be united now and be willing to act, if necessary. We need to be willing to stand undivided in our agreement that none will compromise, but instead that we will stand firm, together, for the freedom of all homeschoolers.