

# AHEM News

Volume 2 • No 2 • Winter 2005

Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts

What  
you  
need  
to  
know  
when  
you  
need  
to  
know  
it

## Current State Issues . . .

### Homeschool Policies in Massachusetts: An Overview

After reading about the situation in Ashburnham, MA, in October, 2004, AHEM offers this clarification of the role of homeschool policies in towns in Massachusetts.

While unsatisfactory policies can occasionally create nuisances for homeschoolers, they are not a huge problem in Massachusetts. Under our current law, the only policy that counts is *Charles*. While homeschoolers within their own towns can have positive experiences working with school officials, build bridges, develop positive relationships, and educate school officials about *Charles* and homeschooling in general, a policy that exceeds *Charles* is not in and of itself a threat to homeschooling freedoms, and does not automatically signify an unreasonable superintendent.

### The Ashburnham situation

In Ashburnham, the superintendent and school committee are in the process of revising the homeschool policy that has been largely unenforced to date. The policy contains some points that exceed *Charles*, and some that are reflective of *Charles*' ambiguity. After feedback from homeschoolers, the superintendent set up an open forum at the library to discuss the details of the policy. Scott Somerville of the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA), who has member families in Ashburnham, put out a call urging homeschoolers from all over the state to attend the meeting "to help defend homeschool freedoms in Ashburnham-Westminster." It's important to remember that "homeschool freedoms" are not at stake in this situation. School districts can write whatever policies they like as an administrative tool, but if their guidelines exceed those of *Charles* and *Brunelle*, then the policy is not legal.

According to a report by Massachusetts Home Learning Association (MHLA) representative and meeting attendee Tammy Rosenblatt, approximately 175 homeschoolers went to the forum. About 20 of that number were from the Ashburnham-Westminster

district. The superintendent allegedly agreed to form a committee to discuss sticking points of the policy. The planned committee will be comprised of a mix of homeschoolers, school principals, school committee members, the superintendent, and perhaps Rosenblatt as a representative of MHLA.

AHEM declined to attend the meeting, reasoning that while we are available to educate, empower, and strategize with local homeschoolers, it is not our role to represent local homeschoolers to their schools. We believe that informed and active homeschoolers empowered to be their own best advocates are our best defense of the right to independently homeschool. Homeschooling oversight is handled at the local level in Massachusetts. In general, homeschoolers within their own towns, who are the only stakeholders in the outcome, have done a fine job of handling the issues that occasionally arise with problem policies.

An open forum is a sign that a superintendent wants to hear what local homeschoolers have to say. While there are some inflexible and unreasonable superintendents out there, in most cases they are just people who are trying to do their jobs. Communicating with them in reasonable, non-contentious ways serves homeschoolers who are trying to negotiate on policy points.

### The DOE and formal policies

A reminder of a key point is in order here. No school district is required to have a homeschooling policy. Policies are not legal documents, only administrative tools superintendents and school committees devise to ease their task of homeschool oversight. The Massachusetts Department of Education reminds schools that they are free to oversee homeschooling on a case-by-case basis. From the DOE Draft Advisory on Home Education:

#### 18. Are school districts required to have a written policy on home education?

No. Neither the compulsory attendance law nor the *Charles* decision requires school districts to have a written policy on home education. Some districts

## Inside this issue . . .

### Current State Issues

Homeschool Policies in Massachusetts . . . . .	1
Homeschoolers, Diplomas and the GED . . . . .	3
Legislative Watch . . . . .	4
Policy & Practice Database Summary . . . . .	5

### National Scene

Journal of College Admissions . . . . .	6
Homeschoolers and Federal Student Aid . . . . .	7

### Meet Massachusetts Homeschoolers

To Swing in a Tree & From Bullets Be Free . . . . .	7
---	---

### Around AHEM

Faces at AHEM . . . . .	9
A Look Back at 2004 . . . . .	9
Home Education Day at the State House . . . . .	10
Upcoming Field Trips . . . . .	11
Membership Cards . . . . .	12
Become a Friend of AHEM . . . . .	12

The information in this newsletter does not constitute legal advice; it is provided for informational purposes only.

© 2005 Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts  
PO Box 1307  
Arlington, MA 02474  
www.AHEM.info



elect to deal with home education-related questions on a case-by-case basis as they arise. Others, particularly those districts with a significant number of home educating families, have found that having a written policy and set of procedures saves time and reduces confusion for both school staff and home educating parents. Whether to adopt a formal home education policy, as well as the contents of that policy, is a decision to be made by local school officials based on the needs of their school district.

One thing homeschoolers struggling with their town's policy can do is to remind superintendents that they are not shirking their oversight responsibilities if they choose not to create a policy.

### Origin of Homeschool Policies

In the process of compiling our policy database, it has come to the attention of AHEM that many school districts in Massachusetts recycle homeschool policies from other towns. Some, Ashburnham included, may be extracting homeschooling policies from a national policy database maintained by the National School Board Association (NSBA). Our research so far shows that at least some of these policies contain extralegal requirements.

If your town is adopting a "new" policy you might check with us to see if it is a policy already in use somewhere in Massachusetts. It's safe to assume that a school adopting such a policy is not going over it with a fine-toothed comb, but rather choosing to lighten its workload by not reinventing the wheel and using something already in existence.

### Pros and cons of working with school officials to revise written homeschool policy

Based on data from AHEM's policy and practice database, it is common for policies in Massachusetts to exceed *Charles* in one aspect or another. In practice, homeschoolers generally do not follow the policy points that are objectionable, and their plans are approved with no problems. There have been cases, however, where homeschoolers have chosen to work with their superintendents or school committees to bring their town policy in line with *Charles* and *Brunelle*. Given that homeschool policies are legally meaningless in Massachusetts, what might be the reasons for spending long hours in negotiation with school committees and superintendents over points that don't need to be followed anyway?

One reason might be that working in a group on an abstract analysis of the issues can feel less threatening than doing it as an individual family, if it appears that the school is actually going to follow through and not approve plans that ignore bogus policy points. On the other hand, taking the school to task on their policy may give the policy more importance than it should have, and may not be necessary to obtain approval.

Another reason is the possible intimidation and confusion of new homeschoolers. If new homeschoolers are not acquainted with the law, they may comply with policies that exceed the law. This is where homeschool advocacy organizations such as AHEM, MHLA, and others enter the picture. By creating networks and support for new homeschoolers, we can help acquaint them with the law and their rights so they can make the best decisions possible. Also, it is the responsibility of any new homeschooler to learn the law and follow it; policies are not the law.

Whether "homeschooler approved" or "ideal" policies should be created is worth considering. A given group of homeschoolers may hammer out an agreement on a homeschool policy with a school committee; then other homeschoolers in that town may come along and choose to do something other than what the policy outlines, yet their choice may still be in keeping with *Charles*. Will

those homeschoolers be taken to task for not wanting to follow the “homeschooler approved” policy? Will school officials be more likely to enforce a policy that they feel some ownership over, having spent hours in committee meetings and negotiation sessions?

## Conclusion

While *Charles* is vague on some points, in practice that translates to flexibility. Some towns choose a minimalist approach to overseeing homeschoolers, do not have any official policy, and largely leave homeschoolers to themselves. In towns with written homeschool policies, the policies aren’t the same from town to town, nor do they have to be given the flexibility *Charles* offers. Again, they are simply administrative tools intended to streamline the contact between school officials and homeschoolers, and guidelines in town policies ought to be in line with those of *Charles*. Under *Charles*, parents are free to homeschool regardless of our own level of education, and we are free to use whatever methods and materials we choose. We are also given a range of options for evaluation, including narrative progress reports we create, an option not available in many states with supposedly “better” homeschooling laws. The diversity among Massachusetts homeschoolers is significant, and our homeschooling law allows for all of it. No town policy can take that away.

As always, homeschoolers have the option of choosing to ignore policy points that exceed *Charles*. In the rare cases where this does not work in gaining approval of an education plan, joining together with other homeschoolers in your town to address extralegal policy points may be helpful. AHEM can refer you to other homeschoolers who have done this if you choose to go this route. In such a case, ascertaining where the policy actually originated may be helpful. Even after the best efforts of homeschoolers and school officials working together, policies may still contain points that homeschoolers don’t want to follow. Regardless of how any group of homeschoolers may have worked with school officials on a policy, the content of a family’s education plan still comes down to the individual family and the *Charles* and *Brunelle* court rulings.

---

## Homeschoolers, Public High School Diplomas, and the GED

Responses from Massachusetts homeschoolers to AHEM’s questionnaire noted that schools are saying they cannot issue diplomas to homeschoolers. This raised the question of whether the Department of Education’s position had changed: the DOE used to say

that issuing a diploma was up to the school committee’s discretion. AHEM asked Liz Keliher, attorney for the DOE, for clarification and indeed they have revised their position on the issuance of diplomas to homeschoolers. From Liz Keliher, DOE attorney:

*“You are correct that homeschoolers may not receive high school diplomas. We are adding this question and answer to our Homeschooling Advisory which, as you know, is still not finalized. However, the question and answer will probably look something like this:*

**High School Diplomas.** Home schooled students are not entitled to the award of a high school diploma, even if they have completed a district-approved home schooling program. The Education Reform Act of 1993 authorized the Board of Education to establish statewide public high school graduation standards (called competency standards), that were implemented with the graduating class of 2003. Satisfaction of the requirements of the competency determination is now a condition for high school graduation. The competency determination requires publicly enrolled students to achieve a passing score on the 10th grade MCAS in both English Language Arts and Math.

Home-schooled students are not permitted to participate in the MCAS and, therefore, cannot fulfill the requirements of the competency determination or attain a high school diploma. However, districts have the discretion to determine whether, or the extent to which, a student who has been home schooled has met the local requirements for graduation. The school committee may provide a home schooled student with a letter or certificate which indicates that the student participated in an approved home schooling program and describes the content of the program and the results of any academic tests administered by the school district.”

## The GED and Homeschoolers

Ruth Derfler, Director GED & Alternative Adult High School Credentials at the Massachusetts Department of Education, clarified that because homeschoolers cannot take the MCAS and therefore cannot get a public school diploma, a homeschooler age 16 or 17 can have the school write a letter stating that he or she is not enrolled, as he or she is a homeschooler, and that letter will qualify them to take the GED. Ms. Derfler said that if a superintendent were confused about this policy and didn’t want to honor a homeschooler’s request for a letter, they could call her (781-338-6604) to confirm.

---

## Legislative Watch

The 2003 - 2004 legislative session has come to a close. AHEM watched several bills during this legislative session including SB 1321, HB 1825, SB 278, SD 2259 and HD 4568. None of these proposed bills became law during the 2003 - 2004 session and will not automatically carry over into the new session.

In December, all new pieces of proposed legislation should have been filed with the Senate or House Clerk's Office to be considered during the 2005 - 2006 Legislative Session. (Bills filed after this deadline need to be approved by the committees on Rules of the two branches.) There were over 2000 bills, called docket bills, filed with the Senate Clerk, and over 4000 docket bills filed with the House Clerk. AHEM has reviewed all of these docket bills. There are several bills that deal with increasing the compulsory education age, denying driver's licenses to truants, reducing school drop-out rates, special education, and voluntary MCAS testing of non-public school students. All of the docket bills we have reviewed are in the initial stage and have not been assigned a bill number or been referred to a committee.

It is helpful to understand the road these bills must travel as they make their way through the legislature:

### Initial filing

New legislation must be filed in the House or Senate Clerk's office by the first Wednesday in December prior to the first year of the new term. Once filed in the Clerk's office, this initial legislation is assigned a docket number. Later, these bills are assigned a bill number, and are then given to the appropriate committee.

### Assigned to committee

Once the committee receives a bill, it schedules a public hearing on the bill, and later meets in executive session (these sessions are open to the public for observation, but the public cannot participate) to review the public testimony from the hearing and to discuss the merits of the bill. The committee then issues a report, often verbal, to the full House or Senate, either recommending or not recommending passage of the bill. The committee also issues a written report on their recommendation and submits the report to the Clerk's office.

### Favorable committee report

If the bill receives a favorable report by the committee, the first reading occurs when the report appears in the Journal of the House or Senate Clerk. If the bill doesn't require referral to another specific committee, the bill is

then referred for a second reading to the Committee on Steering and Policy in the Senate, or placed in the Orders of the Day in the House. If the bill has the potential to affect the finances of the Commonwealth, it is referred to the Senate or House Ways and Means Committee.

Following the second reading, the bill is open for debate on amendments and motions. The bill is then voted on. If the vote is favorable, the bill is ordered for a third reading and is referred to the Committee on Bills. This amounts to preliminary approval of the bill by the branch where the bill originated.

### Unfavorable committee report

Adverse reports of bills by the initial committee are also referred to the Committee on Steering and Policy in Senate, or Orders of the Day in the House. Acceptance of the unfavorable report by either branch is considered a final rejection of the bill. However, an adverse report can be overturned by members of the appropriate branch and given a first reading. In this event, the bill will then follow the same procedure as a favorably reported bill.

### The Committee on Bills

The Committee on Bills examines the technical points, and the legality and constitutionality of the legislation. It also ensures that the bill does not duplicate, or contradict, an existing law. If the Committee on Bills issues a favorable report, the bill returns to the House or Senate for a third reading and is open for more debate.

### Third reading and beyond

After a third reading in the House or Senate, the body then votes on "passing the bill to be engrossed." "Engrossed" means that the bill is now ready to be printed. The bill is referred to the second branch of the legislature, where it must survive three readings and engrossment in the second branch. If that occurs, a vote "to enact" is taken in both branches and the bill goes on to the governor for signing.

If the second branch makes changes in the bill, the legislation must then return to the original branch for a vote on concurrence with the added provisions. If there is no concurrence, a conference committee made up of members from both branches may be formed to reach a compromise. Once a compromise is reached, the bill is again sent to both branches for approval. If the bill is approved by both branches, it goes on to the Governor for signing. If a compromise cannot be reached, the bill will then die.

## The Governor

The Governor can sign the bill into law, allow the bill to become law without signing by holding the bill for ten days while the legislature is in session, veto the bill, or return the bill to the legislature with recommendations for changes.

~Summarized from *Lawmaking in Massachusetts*  
<http://www.mass.gov/legis/lawmkng.htm>

As you can see, it is a long process from the time a bill is filed, to its final passage. As the 2005 - 2006 legislative session begins, AHEM will monitor all legislation and keep you informed and updated on any bill that has the potential to affect homeschoolers in Massachusetts.

---

## Summary of data from Massachusetts town homeschool policy and practice database, November 2004

Here are collated responses to Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts's questionnaire about policy and practice in Massachusetts. For a year and a half, AHEM has been collecting information from homeschoolers about official town policy (including the policies themselves), and about how homeschooling actually works in towns in Massachusetts, according to homeschoolers. While the numbers we've collected so far are probably not statistically significant, they do draw an interesting picture of the way homeschooling works in general (pretty smoothly) and homeschoolers' personal experiences of dealing with school officials (overall, no major problems).

### How much in advance of the school year do school officials ask that you submit homeschooling plans? What do you do? Please explain.

Most schools request that plans be filed before beginning to homeschool, or before the beginning of the school year. Some mention a specific amount of time prior, ranging from one week to one month before school starts. Most homeschoolers comply with this expectation, although there were no reports of problems if a plan was filed later than requested.

### Do school officials ask to meet with homeschoolers? Do you comply? Please explain.

Sixty-three percent of respondents report that school officials do not ask for face-to-face meetings. In one case, a homeschooler asked for a meeting and got it. Nine percent report that school officials asked for an initial meeting with homeschoolers when they filed their first plan; all of these complied. Twenty-eight percent of

homeschoolers are asked to meet annually with school officials. Half of these choose to comply, half do not. There were no negative consequences reported by those who chose not to meet with school officials. Overall this shows a decreased percentage of school officials asking for face-to-face meetings, while the response of homeschoolers to such requests remains about the same proportionately.

### Do school officials ask to visit your home? Do you comply? Please explain.

Ninety-four percent of respondents do not have school officials ask to visit their homes. There were no negative consequences for not agreeing to a home visit. Indeed, the 1998 *Brunelle* Supreme Court decision made it clear that home visits cannot be required as a condition of approval.

### Do school officials ask for a schedule or number of hours on each subject? Do you comply? Please explain.

Fifty-three percent of respondents are not asked to supply a schedule. Of the 47% who are asked for a schedule, 71% satisfy the request by saying they will meet or exceed the 900/990 hours that the public schools cover. The remaining 29% (14% of *all* respondents) supply a more detailed schedule.

There were no negative consequences for those who chose to give the broader answer rather than a grid type schedule. See <http://www.ahem.info/TipsforWritingYourEdPlan.htm> for ways to satisfy the request for a schedule without going into needless detail.

### What form of assessment do you provide and how many times a year?

- About half of respondents write a progress report.
- Twenty-one percent of respondents submit work samples or a portfolio. Several of the people who write progress reports indicated that the schools expected them to also submit work samples. Please note that *Charles* requires homeschoolers to submit only one form of evaluation. A report alone should suffice, or work samples without any written narrative, should suffice.
- Fourteen percent of respondents choose to test. Tests used include the California Achievement Test (CAT), the Personalized Achievement Summary System Test (PASS), the Wide Range Assessment

**"School policies that exceed *Charles* and *Brunelle* do not have to be adhered to by home-schoolers."**

•  
•  
•  
•

test (WRAT), the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS), the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the Stanford Test.

- Thirteen percent of respondents submit no evaluation at all.
- Ten percent of respondents indicated their evaluation method varies.
- Four percent of respondents indicated use of a form of evaluation other than testing, progress reports, or work samples.

Seventy-seven percent of homeschoolers who indicated frequency submit evaluation once a year, 19% submit two times a year, 4% submit more than twice a year.

### **Do school officials provide you with a letter of approval?**

Seventy-six percent of respondents receive an approval letter. Five percent get a letter if they ask for it. Nineteen percent do not receive a letter and don't ask for one.

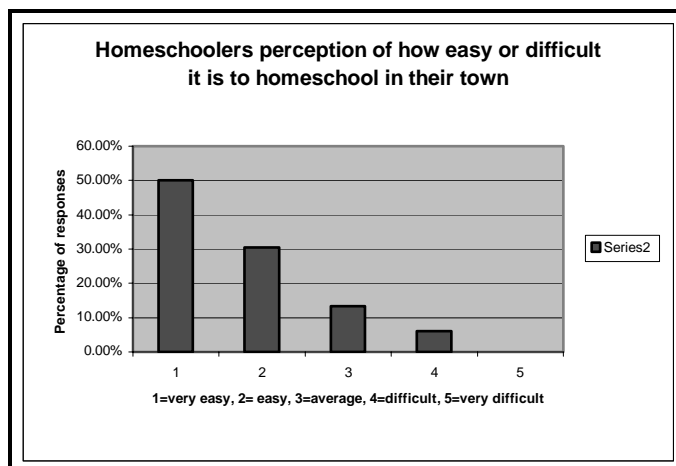
### **Do school officials allow homeschoolers to participate in school activities? Please be specific.**

Eighty-four percent of respondents report that their school allows them to participate in classes, sports, extracurricular activities, or some combination of these. Sixteen percent report that their school does not allow them to participate in school functions at all.

### **“On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being very easy to deal with and 5 being very difficult, how would you rate your town's treatment of homeschoolers?”**

Eighty percent of respondents reported their town to be easy or very easy to deal with (slightly up from last year), 13% reported their town to be average, 6% reported their town to be difficult, and no respondents considered their town to be very difficult to deal with. While this shows a greater percentage of homeschoolers describing their town as difficult compared to last year, interestingly the poor rating is usually due to what the homeschooler perceives as an “attitude” problem on the part of school officials rather than any tangible obstacles to homeschooling. So this could actually be a positive finding, in that homeschoolers are becoming more aware of their rights and recognize that any infringement upon them is a problem.

And, while the percentage of homeschoolers rating their town “difficult” went up by about 4%, the percent giving their town the best rating of “very easy” also rose by an even greater margin of 9%. Some towns that homeschoolers rate as friendly include Melrose, New Bedford, North Andover, Northborough, Woburn, and West Bridgewater.



In summary, things continue to go pretty smoothly for homeschoolers here in Massachusetts. Most homeschoolers report no difficulties in dealing with school officials. In cases where school officials ask for more than *Charles* allows, we see over and over again that homeschoolers who are aware of their rights simply submit what *Charles* allows, and there are no negative repercussions for standing up for oneself in this way. Furthermore, standing up for your rights in this way strengthens the ability of other homeschoolers to do the same, and lessens the likelihood that school officials' demands will escalate. We can't say it enough: School policies that exceed *Charles* and *Brunelle* do not have to be adhered to by homeschoolers. Questions? Call AHM: 781-648-5579.

We hope you will help us build the database further as the more responses we get, the clearer the picture of homeschooling in Massachusetts becomes. The more questionnaire responses we receive, the easier it is for us to pinpoint hotspots or identify trends. Please take a few minutes to fill out the questionnaire, which you can find at [www.ahem.info](http://www.ahem.info).

## **National Scene . . .**

### **Journal of College Admissions**

AHEM is happy to be able to share with you, in .pdf format:

#### ***The Journal of College Admissions* No. 185, Fall 2004: Special Homeschool Issue** featuring

- “Homeschoolers on to College: What Research Shows Us” by Dr. Brian D. Ray
- “A Study of Admission Officers' Perceptions of and Attitudes Toward Homeschool Students” by Dr. Paul Jones and Dr. Gene Gloeckner

- “Unintended Admission Consequences of Federal Aid for Homeschoolers” by Sean Callaway
- and more

Find it at

<http://www.ahem.info/JournalofCollegeAdmissions.htm>

*Copied and distributed with the permission of the Journal of College Admission, copyright 2004.*

## Homeschoolers and Federal Student Aid

Recently a Friend of AHEM wrote to us wondering how homeschoolers were to answer a question on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) regarding secondary school completion. Question 25 of the paper FAFSA asks: “Will the student have a high school diploma/GED before he or she enrolls?” He pointed out that many homeschoolers, however well qualified they may be, have neither a GED nor a formal high school diploma.

The 2004-2005 *Federal Student Aid Handbook*, Chapter 1, p. 6 addresses the above concern:

“Under the student eligibility provisions of the HEA, a student who does not have a high school diploma or GED is eligible to receive Title IV, HEA program assistance if the student completes a secondary school education in a home-school setting that is treated as a home school or private school under state law. However, a student must be enrolled in an eligible institution to receive Title IV, HEA program assistance, and the statute also requires that an eligible institution may admit as regular students only students with high school diplomas or GEDs, or students who are beyond the age of compulsory school attendance in the state in which the institution is located.

The Department considers that a home-schooled student is beyond the age of compulsory school attendance if the state in which the institution is located does not consider the student truant once he or she has completed a home-school program.

In documenting a home-schooled student's completion of secondary school in a home-schooled setting, an institution may rely on a home-schooled student's self-certification that he or she completed secondary school in a home school setting, just as it may accept a high school graduate's self-certification of his or her receipt of a high school diploma. Self-certification of the receipt of a high-school diploma is commonly done through an answer to a question on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). However, because the FAFSA

does not include a question regarding home-school completion, institutions may accept such self-certifications in institutional application documents, in letters from the students, or in some other appropriate record.”

## Meet Massachusetts Homeschoolers . . .

### To Swing in a Tree and From Bullets be Free: Why I Left School

*by Eli Gerzon*

A while back, after I had been unschooling for a year or so, I decided to write out some uncommon answers to very common homeschooling questions. The best one was, “Why did you decide to leave school?” My reply: “If you saw a monkey swinging in a tree, would you ask it why it left the zoo?” The essence of this tongue in cheek response is the start, but not the end, of how I would honestly answer the question now. The alternate way I’ve come to look at it evolved from a heated discussion with some homeschooling parents, friends of mine, after attending a John Taylor Gatto speech. I was trying to make a point when I asked, “Yes, but what is the main reason you don’t send your children to school?” I expected them to simply answer “freedom” and thus help prove some point I was trying to make, but I was surprised when Glenn answered in a thoughtful voice almost to himself, “Why do I avoid sending my children into a battlefield where bullets are flying?” I had to stop and think about this answer because it sounded like a very good one, but I didn’t fully appreciate it until about a year later. Now, I think those two rhetorical questions illustrate most clearly the reason I left school.

This is all very abstract and you might be wondering what was actually going through my head when I decided to leave. I guess it was something like this: “What! I can leave school legit? Okay!” To illustrate let us go back to the monkey metaphor: monkey sitting depressed, spent entire life behind bars occasionally flinging feces but not really doing anything to change situation, notices not only other monkeys free outside of cage but clear, unobstructed opening from which to escape! He gestures to zookeepers and they make it clear that he can, in fact, leave. Indeed, he goes and they never do bother him except when he, on occasion, goes back to the zoo to visit old friends, but this is the Arlington Zoo and every zoo is different. All in all, the only thing our furry friend can say is, “Okay!”

A more serious but no more truthful answer to the question of why I left school would be: "I found out that I could leave school." Indeed, I thought that that would be enough of a reason for many of my schoolmates, but I soon found that even for my closest and most like-minded friends, being *able* to leave was not enough of a reason *to* leave. In order to offer an adequate explanation to the discerning reader of why I decided to leave school, I need to start talking not just about myself, but about me in relation to my classmates, people in a similar or identical situation, who did not make the same choice as me. There was something dead inside of them that was alive inside of me. Some readers may find this initial description of my friends and classmates harsh, but I have no desire to be harsh, only the desire to describe truthfully what I observed. I remember very clearly sitting in one of my freshman classes and looking around the room at the students. I could not see much going on inside of them; there wasn't much life there. Again, I expect some people will want to know how in the world someone can claim to see into another person. I can't claim it at all. But I know that as I looked around the room, I saw young adults sitting, saying next to nothing, examining and biting their nails, looking aimlessly around the room, or outright sleeping. At times my regular arguments with teachers and other students nudged their stupor, either entertaining or annoying them.

Now, I have some shame, both appropriate and unnecessary, about all the arguing I did in my later years of school and certainly after I left school. A teacher really did have his/her work cut out for him/her if I was in the class. I was often a difficult person to converse with and maybe to even just listen to, according to some classmates. I'm not very proud of the aggressive way I spoke. Still, I realize that I was awake that whole time, something was going on inside of me every minute I sat in school. There's a lot one can say about what one should do while one is awake, but regardless one does have to start by at least being awake!

One specific example took place in Mr. O'Sullivan's Freshman Honors History class. It's significant to note that I was in all honors classes, not for me to brag, but for readers to realize that when I talk about the apathy of my fellow students, I'm referring to the supposedly most dedicated and intelligent students. At one point we were reading about the Vikings and I noticed that this group of people was referred to as "warlike barbarians." I raised my hand, which made some students quietly groan and despair: "Not another argument from Eli." In this case, I was upset by the fact that the Vikings were

clearly presented as more violent, warmongering, and less sophisticated, reasonable, and advanced, along with all the other implications of "barbarian" and "uncivilized," than other nations we read about. Why is it that people who rape, pillage, occupy, and assimilate other nations, are more "civilized" than countries that just rape, pillage, and leave? Mr. O'Sullivan was clearly not very interested in discussing it and certainly no one else was saying anything about it. But I was persistent and eventually Mr. O'Sullivan said, "All right, Eli, maybe you are correct, but if you see a multiple choice question on a test that says 'How would you describe the Vikings?' and you want to check the right answer, you'll check the one that says, 'warlike barbarians.'" I was completely taken off-guard by this honest evaluation: I felt deflated and said simply, "Yes, of course I know that." The conversation ended there and I did in fact understand completely what he was saying. But, of course, that wasn't the point. I was interested in determining what was true and his ultimate response was that regardless of truth, you will be required to repeat what has been taught you. As I said the conversation ended there because no one else noticed or objected to this.

I don't mean to indicate that my classmates were not intelligent, or even less aware, active, or caring than me. In fact, it disturbed me the most when I was in a classroom that included people whose awareness I really respected. Yet they said nothing when untrue things were taught in class, in my opinion and, importantly, in theirs as well. After class I might ask privately why, after I challenged an issue, no one else contributed to the discussion. I don't remember getting an answer that satisfied me. The answer I got most often was: "Why bother?" At the time, this felt like very much of a non-answer to me. But I have come to see some wisdom in it.

The students I mentioned may have realized that it was a waste of time to fight every injustice and inaccuracy in school. I agree now, and that's why I have some regret about the time and energy I spent trying to do just that. But at the same time I go back to Glenn's question of, "Why do I avoid sending my children into a battlefield where bullets are flying?" I imagine myself on that battlefield. Lies and fear are being shot all around me and I know I do not want to just stand there while being riddled with such ammunition. I feel the need to fight back, fiercely, or flee. And so I did. One could say I left school because I was affected by the lies and fear more than the people around me. Then there is still another reason. My peers could have claimed they were saving their energy for more important things and they may



have been right. But I felt an urgency to discover what was true with whomever I was speaking, wherever I was, and a place that claimed to exist in order to educate seemed an especially important place to start.

I started feeling that urgency at a young age and I still feel it today. When I discovered that I didn't need to sit myself down every day in school, in a place that I knew was dangerous in relation to truth and freedom, I acted. But long before I started unschooling I was looking for truth, and questioning every small detail and large aspect of life. School was in my way of doing this so it was a natural step to leave. Indeed, now, several years later, after attending some college, and traveling across a humble but goodly portion of the globe, I'm on the same path as when I was twelve years old and giving poor Ms. Nocella such a hard time.

She was trying to demonstrate a word problem on the board in which you buy such and such clothing for such and such a price. We were supposed to compute something that involved sales tax. I pointed out that there is no sales tax on clothing. That must have been the straw that broke the camel's back, because she started crying. In many ways, I was a jerk. Still, in the end, that may have been the spirit that got me out, and I need to be thankful for it. I need to be thankful for a fire that may have burned me and others, but also lit a way through dark and cold places. This fire seemed to drive me without my willing it. Nor could I always keep it from affecting others, like Ms. Nocella, in ways that I did not intend. I've tried ignoring and avoiding it, but life is a cold place without it. While one of my current projects is learning to use moderation in exercising my gifts by questioning, searching, challenging, and being respectful of others all at the same time, I need to honor the fire that freed and protected me. Ultimately, the answer to why I left school may be that fire that wouldn't go out.

*After graduating first in his one man class in the spring of 2002, for which he gave a valedictorian speech entitled "On the Importance of Whole Soul Safety," at the Whole Education Without Schooling Conference, Watertown, MA, former homeschooler Eli Gerzon traveled around the world using money he raised with his own gardening and organizing business. He is back in town and back at work. He can be reached at egwizard@yahoo.com for business and for questions or comments about his writing, including his traveling newsletter.*

## Around AHEM . . .

### Faces at AHEM

Suzanne MacDonald lives in Bellingham with her husband Roger, and their three children Hannah, 13, Emma, 10, and Ian, 2. She discovered homeschooling

when her oldest was a year old and began researching and going to homeschooling conferences. It didn't take long to be convinced this was the lifestyle she wanted for her family and they have homeschooled ever since. Suzanne also worked at *Holt Associates* for a couple years and took part in working at their *Growing Without Schooling* conferences. The family is very active in their community theatre group, *Encore Repertory Company*, where they are all involved in some aspect of theatre from assistant producing to directing and acting. Even Ian is growing up in the theatre world, and will be on stage soon! When they aren't busy with rehearsals, she is helping out at their girls' dance studio or simply at home having quiet time. Presently, Suzanne juggles teenage life with toddler life which doesn't seem to afford much time for other interests, although she has many. Nonetheless, she wouldn't trade it for anything and is grateful to be blessed with the eyes and heart that have allowed her to see the value in this "alternate living and learning," and ultimately giving her family a sense of freedom and control of their own lives.

---

## A Look Back at 2004

As we bid goodbye to 2004, we want to be sure to **thank all of you** for your support over the past year, whether it came in the form of reading our emails or newsletter, filling out the questionnaire, joining us on a field trip, attending our conference, handing out trifolds, or sending us a cash donation. Any level of interest and participation is greatly appreciated and is what fuels our efforts.

## Highlights of 2004

A trip down memory lane, or an opportunity to catch up on events and info you may have missed the first time around:

*In 2004, we had fun **connecting** with a cross section of Massachusetts homeschoolers in a variety of settings:*

- **State House visits** in January, April, and October.
- **Field trips** to the Pequot Museum in CT in March, the Museum of Science in Boston in June and September, and the Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester in November.
- The AHEM Whole Education Without Schooling **Conference** in May, which featured the MA premier of the movie *Grown Without Schooling*.
- An **informational talk** presented by AHEM about homeschooling at the Seekonk Public Library in June.

Throughout the year, we reported on a variety of **issues** important to Massachusetts homeschoolers, among them:

- Response to media reports on homeschooling and child abuse, as well as NJ Backlash
- Military recruiters
- Federal Student Aid
- Diplomas & the GED
- Local homeschooling policies
- Homeschooling and special education
- Legislation

We were pleased to be able to **offer**:

- Access to a special edition of the Journal of College Admissions on homeschooling
- AHEM membership cards
- AHEM trifold, with info on homeschooling in Massachusetts—perfect for handing out at events, meetings or for leaving at your local library.

Ongoing efforts **include**:

- Legislative watch
- Policy & practice database
- Communicating with our Friends
- Support group listings (27 statewide now listed; do you know of any groups in Norfolk, Nantucket, or Dukes counties?)
- Events page, including Not-Back-to-School Events
- County Contacts, available for phone help anytime

We look forward to meeting more of you in 2005, and continuing to grow the number of informed and active homeschoolers in Massachusetts. We always appreciate feedback on how we are doing and ideas about how we can serve you better.

---

## Home Education Day at the State House - Monday, April 25, 2005

Mark your calendar and begin to plan your field trip to attend Home Education Day at the State House – **Monday, April 25, 2005**. An excellent field trip for individual families or support groups, Home Education Day provides learning opportunities as well as the fun and excitement of going to Boston, riding the T to the State House, spending time getting to know more about Massachusetts state government and our beautiful State House, and meeting other home educators and legislators from around the state at a breakfast reception.

In our experience, legislators are always very gracious and pleased to have the opportunity to meet with constituents. We intend to make it easy for you to arrange to meet personally with your legislators during your visit by providing you with written invitations for

the reception that will be signed by you and sent by us to your elected officials. A personal note from you is always a welcome addition.

In order to encourage as many homeschoolers from around the state as possible to be a part of the day, we've outlined how you can turn this excursion into a mini-vacation to the historic Lexington-Concord area, crowned by a visit to the State House and Boston, and tailored to your family's individual tastes and needs:

- **Sunday afternoon:** Explore Lexington and Concord in the afternoon: Minute Man National Park, historic sites; optional program at the National Heritage Museum
- **Sunday evening:** Social event—contra dance, socializing & conversation
- **Sunday night:** Stay at Hawthorn Suites in Arlington (special group rates, kitchenettes & easy access by mass transit to downtown Boston)
- **Monday morning (10:00 AM - noon):** Home Education Day at the State House, including Legislators' reception, (a chance to meet and talk with your legislators while enjoying light refreshments provided by AHEM), live music, State House tours, observe a legislative session, office visits with elected officials, and displays (information on how to contribute something to the displays about homeschooling in Massachusetts will be available soon.
- **Monday afternoon:** After lunch on your own explore the Freedom Trail, or other attractions in Boston; sign up for optional tour of the Paul Revere House.

**We need you in order for this to be a success. Please plan to join us at the State House on Monday, April 25, 2005.**

To receive registration materials email [info@ahem.info](mailto:info@ahem.info) with adult names, address, and zip code, or call 781-641-0566 and leave that information plus email if available, and phone number, on the answering machine. We will then email or mail you a registration packet, which will flesh out the schedule above with details about the optional field trip add-ons, other area attractions, the hotel, the MBTA, and links to educational materials, allowing you to plan your visit to suit your own style. **The first 50 registrations will receive a special gift upon arrival at the State House.**

---

## Upcoming Field Trips

### The DeCordova Museum

<http://www.decordova.org/>

Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts is planning a tour for ages six and up on **Thursday, January 27<sup>th</sup> at 10:15 PM at the DeCordova Museum, 51 Sandy Pond Road, Lincoln, MA 01773.** We will meet in the main lobby at 10:15 PM.

We will be divided into groups of 10 or fewer to see the exhibition **“Pretty Sweet: The Sentimental Image in Contemporary Art.”**

**Cost:** \$6.00 per student, \$9 per adult. Children five and under have free admission to the museum, but will not be allowed to go on the tour. Parents can explore the museum and/or sculpture park with little ones while older children are on the tour. If parents choose to do this, they must still pay \$9 and note when registering that they will not be included in the head count for the tour group.

**If you want to go:** Mail a check made out to *Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts* to AHM, PO Box 1307, Arlington, MA 02474. Please include the number of children and adults, ages of children, your address, and email or phone number. Those with email will receive confirmation about a week before the visit.

Space is limited; **Checks must be postmarked by January 15<sup>th</sup>.** No refunds after January 15<sup>th</sup>. Email [FieldTrips@AHM.info](mailto:FieldTrips@AHM.info) for more information or call 781-641-0566.

#### From **Tips for Visiting DeCordova Museum with Children**

[www.decordova.org/decordova/school/vistchld.html](http://www.decordova.org/decordova/school/vistchld.html)  
Before leaving the house, prepare children for the visit. Tell them the overall plan for the visit (What will they do? How long will they be there? Will they visit the Store or the Café as well as the galleries or Sculpture Park?) Also discuss the rules in art museums (No touching the art in the galleries, no running). Pack a sketch pad and a plain (not colored) pencil if your child likes to draw or write.

When looking at art, you can stimulate a lot of discussion by asking these three questions in this order:

What do you see?

What’s going on here?

What do you see that makes you say that?

Don’t agree or disagree with their answers, just listen attentively and you may be surprised to see the art in a whole new way!

There is plenty of **free parking** available.

### The New Bedford Whaling Museum

<http://www.whalingmuseum.org/>

Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts is planning a tour for ages six and up on **Friday, March 25<sup>th</sup> at 1:15 PM at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, 18 Johnny Cake Hill, New Bedford, MA.** We will meet in the main lobby at 1:15 PM.

The focus of the tour will be “Learning About Whales.” Participants will be free to explore the museum on their own after the guided tour.

**Cost:** \$6.00 per student, \$7 per adult. Children five and under have free admission to the museum, but will not be allowed to go on the tour. Parents can explore the museum and/or sculpture park with little ones while older children are on the tour. If parents choose to do this, they must still pay \$7 and note when registering that they will not be included in the head count for the tour group.

**If you want to go:** Mail a check made out to *Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts* to AHM, PO Box 1307, Arlington, MA 02474. Please include the number of children and adults, ages of children, your address, and email or phone number. Space is limited; **Checks must be postmarked by March 10<sup>th</sup>.** No refunds after March 10<sup>th</sup>. Email [FieldTrips@AHM.info](mailto:FieldTrips@AHM.info) for more information or call 781-641-0566.

Street parking is available, as well as a parking garage on Elm Street.

#### **Directions:**

New Bedford is located one hour south of Boston and 35 minutes east of Providence. From the west: Take the Mass. Turnpike to Exit 11A for Rte. 495 South to Exit 7B - Rte. 24 South to New Bedford to Exit 12 - Rte. 140 South to Exit 2E - Rte. 195 East - Cape Cod to Exit 15 - Rte. 18 New Bedford Historic District to Downtown exit. Turn right on Elm Street and take second left - Bethel St., which becomes Johnny Cake Hill. Museum is on second block.

**From north/central:** Take either Rte. 495 South or Rte. 128 South (whichever is closest to Rte. 24) and follow directions listed above. From the south: Take Rte. 95 North to Rte. 195 East, then follow directions above. From Cape Cod: take Rte. 495 North to Rte. 25 to Rte. 195 to Exit 15 - Rte. 18, then follow directions above.

Field trip participants will be added to the Friends of AHM list unless they specifically opt out.

---

## Membership cards now available

Any homeschooler can use a letter from their local school department as legal proof of homeschooling status.

AHEM now has available “membership” cards. While they are not legal proof of homeschooling status, homeschoolers have found that many retailers do accept such cards as evidence of homeschooling, allowing homeschoolers to be eligible for educator discounts at various retail stores, most notably book stores, arts and crafts stores, and educational supply stores. Anywhere that offers discounts to teachers is probably receptive to offering the same to homeschoolers. It can't hurt to ask!

If you would like an AHEM membership card, please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to AHEM, PO Box 1307, Arlington, MA 02474. Indicate “membership card” on the envelope, and allow 4-6 weeks for delivery. People requesting cards will be added to the Friends of AHEM list unless they specifically opt out, so include your email address as well if you have one, as that is our preferred form of communication.

---

## Become a Friend of AHEM

Advocates for Home Education in Massachusetts (AHEM) is a nonprofit, independent, grassroots, volunteer-run, educational organization that gathers and disseminates information about homeschooling in Massachusetts through education, advocacy, and events. We believe that informed and active homeschoolers are their own best advocates in maintaining the right to independently homeschool. We welcome and value the participation of anyone interested in homeschooling in Massachusetts.

Friends of AHEM keep abreast of legislative and other issues that affect Massachusetts homeschoolers via an announcement only email list or this newsletter. Friends of AHEM with email get special notice of AHEM events, field trips, and get-togethers.

Be proactive: become a Friend of AHEM. Even if your involvement is simply to stay informed, that strengthens all of us.

To become a Friend of AHEM and receive email updates, send your name, address, and email address to [info@AHEM.info](mailto:info@AHEM.info). To become a Friend of AHEM and receive *AHEM News* by US mail instead of email updates, send your name and address to AHEM, PO Box 1307, Arlington, MA 02474. SASEs are appreciated.

Advocates for Home Education  
in Massachusetts  
PO Box 1307  
Arlington, MA 02474