

History of Homeschooling in New Jersey **Statement by Tim Haas, New Jersey Homeschool Association**

12 January 2004

My name is Tim Haas. I am a co-founder of the New Jersey Homeschool Association, a statewide information and advocacy group serving homeschoolers of all beliefs and educational philosophies.

Homeschooling has a long and venerable history. In fact, on the first page of what have come to be called his *Meditations*, the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius said: "From my great-grandfather, [I learned] not to go to the public schools, but to have good teachers at home, and to know that on such things a man should spend liberally."

The history of homeschooling in New Jersey may not reach back quite *that* far, but it is venerable in its own way. Before the state's first compulsory attendance statute was enacted in 1875, all education was private and much was home-based. After the statute, as industrialization and urbanization took hold in our growing country, "public schooling" and "education" came to be regarded as nearly synonymous. But the current statute (NJSA 18A:38-25), dating from the 1920s, has always permitted parents the option to cause their children to "receive equivalent instruction elsewhere than at school."

In 1963, a brave woman named Barbara Massa took those words to heart and homeschooled her daughter for two years. After putting her back into public school in September 1965, Mrs. Massa took her out again the following April. That November, Mrs. Massa and her husband were charged with failing to provide their daughter with equivalent instruction. In 1967, the case reached the Morris County Court, where Mrs. Massa, acting as her own lawyer, convinced the judge that she had indeed fulfilled her obligations. In his decision, the judge ruled that "equivalent" meant general academic equivalence only, not equivalence of methods, outcomes, or schedules. This was the true birth of homeschooling in New Jersey as we know it today.

The full implications of the Massa ruling were slow to spread. Many pioneering families were viewed with suspicion throughout the 1970s, and some were charged with truancy and educational neglect. In 1982, after years of grassroots advocacy by homeschoolers, then-Education Commissioner Fred Burke issued a document stating clearly for the first time that "the local board of education has no responsibility for determining progress of students being instructed at home, and there is likewise no authority to require testing."

Fifteen years after Massa, a period in which hundreds of families had already begun — and some had already finished — homeschooling, the state had finally informed every local district that once a child was removed from the public school system, the sole responsibility for his or her education rested with the parents. In the years since, thousands of New Jersey families have proudly embraced that joyous duty, to their children's great benefit.

Of course, A4033 is not the first piece of homeschooling legislation we have faced. In 1994, Assemblywoman Charlotte Vandervalk introduced a bill that would have required testing of homeschooled children. Dedicated parents rose to the call, educating her on the advantages of homeschooling and showing her that testing was unnecessary to ensure the continued success of New Jersey's homeschoolers. The assemblywoman soon withdrew her bill from consideration, and she remains an advocate of homeschooling to this day.

The legal, moral, and practical questions about the fitness of homeschooling parents to care for and educate their children were answered in New Jersey decades ago. Sadly, because of issues bearing only the most tangential relationship to homeschooling, it seems as if a new generation of families will have to fight the battle all over again. Honoring the memory of all those who have come before us, we will again prevail.