



NSW TEACHERS FEDERATION

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19 September 2014

In reply please quote: 1096/2014/AU:tc

Mr John Young
A/Director, Committees
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Mr Young

Re: Submission to the Legislative Council Inquiry into Home Schooling

Please find enclosed submission by the NSW Teachers Federation on Inquiry into Home Schooling:

- (1) Responses to Questions on Notice, and
- (2) A corrected transcript

Yours sincerely

John Dixon
General Secretary

Attached



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SUBMISSION

TO

THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL INQUIRY

ON

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

Authorised by

John Dixon
General Secretary
NSW Teachers Federation

19 September 2014

INQUIRY INTO HOMESCHOOLING

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

First question:

CHAIR: Sadly some youths in large schools have taken their lives. How do teachers process and cope with that? How does the Federation help them? One would hope there is safety in numbers. As you said, teachers are doing all the right things and watching for all the signs. However, sadly some young people, either indirectly because of social media or because of bullying, are taking their lives. How does the Federation deal with that situation? What sorts of supports are available?

Answer:

Clearly any suicide or death is devastating to everyone in a school community, including the teachers. While the Federation does not believe that this question is an appropriate one in the context of an inquiry into home schooling, three main points are offered in response:

Firstly, these types of incidents need to be considered in the broader context. The vast majority of students in public schools are doing well. It is actually because of schooling that we have less bullying in society. There are many anti-bullying programs in schools and many hundreds of thousands of students are developing resilience as a result of these programs on a continuing basis. Through regular interactions with peers and adults in schools, and participation in welfare programs, students are learning to build strong and respectful relationships, to be accepting of and celebrate difference and diversity, to support one another in times of difficulty and to bounce back from adversity. On any given day there are probably tens of thousands of interventions across the state, which enable students to survive and thrive. We do not teach those young people to cope with adversity by withdrawing from society, and in fact, social isolation is often a factor in suicide.

It is tragic that bullying and suicide occurs, but they are neither isolated in schools, nor the fault of schools. Schools not only run anti-bullying and welfare programs which support hundreds of thousands of students across the state, but they have counselling services and can and do put students experiencing difficulties in touch with support services within the community.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes information on suicide for the age group 15-24 years (some of school age and some recently out of school) for the whole of Australia. The rates of suicide in 2010 for this age group were 5.2 per 100 000 for females and 13.4 per 100 000 for males. In the same year the infant mortality rate was 4.1 deaths under the age of 1 per 1000 live births. This makes the infant mortality rate about 3000% higher than the teen suicide rate for males and more than 7500% higher than the rate for females. Nobody is suggesting that sick infants be withdrawn from the very services which can provide them with help.

Secondly, it is the responsibility of the employer to provide support in cases of critical incidents (including suicides) in schools. The role of the Federation is primarily to ensure the employer is meeting its responsibilities in that regard. In the case of this type of critical incident, the Federation acknowledges that the Department is usually very quick to implement its support processes, which include counselling services and more. The Department would be better placed to provide detail around exactly what support exists.

However, the Federation does provide support to school communities in times where a school community is experiencing a trauma of this nature. Some of the specific activities of the Federation in the case of such incidents may include:

- The local area Organiser making contact with the Federation Representative and Principal in the school and offering support.
- Providing advice around any flexibility that may be required in the school's administration, such as arrangements to ensure students are appropriately supervised when teachers who are in shock or grieving cannot immediately return to a normal school routine.
- Ensuring that counselling services have been engaged for students and staff at the school.
- Depending on the nature of the incident, the Organiser may visit the school to provide advice dealing with the legal aspects of the incident, such as in circumstances where police are involved.
- If the media is involved, the Federation can provide advice and support for the Federation Representative in dealing with the media.
- The Federation has a range of written advice for members which may be relevant, such as on: dealing with the police; providing witness statements; bullying; homophobia, biphobia and transphobia; and much more.
- The Organiser will make members aware of advice and support available from the Department and from the Federation.
- Members can contact the Communications/Welfare team of the union for advice and support.
- Organisers may make others in Federation aware of the incident if necessary to ensure the union is understanding in its operations.
- The Organiser may well monitor the situation over the longer term, ensuring the school is recovering and dealing with the crisis, ensuring that the Department is providing adequate support.

Second question:

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: At least one submission made the point that homeschooled children are not able to access TVET courses, Open High School, the school sports program or the hospital schools program. These are available to children not only in the government system but also in the nongovernment system. They then draw the inference that it is unfair that they are available to private school students but not to their homeschooled students. Does the Federation have a position on that or would you like to take that question on notice?

Answer:

When parents choose to home school their children, they are required by the State to demonstrate that they are teaching the curriculum. The curriculum is the socially accepted basic minimum to which all children must have access to be able to effectively participate in society. The curriculum is developed as part of extensive consultation with experts and stakeholders (as was addressed in the Federation's written submission to the inquiry) and forms the knowledge and skills base to which all children have a right.

The Federation believes that if a parent is seeking to access part of that curriculum through the education system, then that constitutes an admission that they are incapable of meeting their child's educational needs in the home.

Educational facilities and services such as those mentioned in the question are provided as an adjunct and support for the school system. They are not created to allow or promote opting out of the system. Due to

limited educational resources being available, access to these services is done according to strict criteria which are designed to ensure that the maximum number of students are able to access a quality education. Were homeschooling students to access these services, they may well be taking the place of a student who has an entitlement to those resources because they already have a place in an institution. For example, students enrol at the Open High School to study a language course which their base school¹ is unable to offer. A homeschooling student may well live near a school with the capacity to teach that language, but with a parent who cannot. Were they enrolled at their local public school, they would not be entitled to a place at the Open High School.

While students from the non-government sector do have access to some services run by the public sector, there are strict conditions attached. The conditions of entry to these services are typically based around the capacity of the base school to deliver the full range of available curriculum. It is extremely difficult to measure a home school's capacity to do so. For example, students from schools can only enrol in the Open High School or distance education for single courses if their total number of subjects does not exceed the minimum requirements. There are maximum numbers for how many students a single school can enrol in these settings. These are very difficult to measure in the context of home schooling. Additionally, these settings require the base school to: develop appropriate risk assessments; provide facilities and time to complete relevant work; and ensure the program is supervised by a qualified teacher. There is no way for the centre to assure this is happening in the context of a home schooling student.

If a parent wishes to access these services, then they can do so by enrolling their child in their local public school.

QUESTION TO WHICH THE FEDERATION PROVIDES ADDITIONAL INFORMATION IN RESPONSE:

Chair: My point is that you have gone through that accreditation process to earn the right to teach a whole range of children. However, homeschooling often involves a mum or dad, or both, taking on the education of their own child. They would not be expected to do 15 years of education training to have the privilege of teaching their own children.

Answer:

While it is true that you do not need a licence to be a parent, society has in place a whole range of mechanisms to protect the rights of children, irrespective of the choices of their parents. Sometimes the responsibility of a parent is to acknowledge circumstances in which as an individual it is not possible meet the particular needs of the child and to facilitate access to an appropriately qualified person. We do not allow a parent to operate on or prescribe medication for their child without medical qualifications. We do not allow a parent to drive the child in a vehicle without a licence.

A quality education is the right of every child. While a parent may well know much about their children that a teacher does not know, this does not necessarily mean that they know how to teach the full range of curriculum that society expects all children to access. Educational neglect is a form of child abuse, and children experiencing educational neglect are quite rightly reported to the authorities as a child protection concern. This shows clearly that society does not accept that a child's right to an education is met simply by virtue of having parents. Society owes a responsibility to all children to ensure they are receiving a high quality education.

¹ Typically, in policies and documents relating to this type of educational provision, the term 'home school' is used to refer to the school at which the student is enrolled for most of their studies. To avoid confusion in this context, this shall be referred to as the 'base school'. The committee should understand that this is not the language used in the policy documents of the Department.