

## Response to the Inquiry into homeschooling

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I have been asked to comment on the fairness of the funding arrangements for school students, approximately \$14 000 for public school students and \$0 for home schooled students. Let me begin by stating that there are many things about homeschooling, and indeed this inquiry, which I think are unfair.

I think it is unfair that the Department of Education claims that attendance is synonymous with engagement and connectedness. It is not.

I think it is unfair that homeschooled students cannot access services and support when needed. This would include things such as TVET courses, immunisations, hospital school and so on.

I think it is unfair that senior students registered for homeschooling are expected to follow HSC syllabuses, without being able to access the HSC. I think that the HSC should be accessible for those who wish to pursue this path. I also think that senior students should be able to be registered using alternative curriculum, which would be assessed for quality and appropriateness.

I think it is unfair that an inquiry into regulations for registration of homeschooling spent much time discussing evolution versus creation. That was not in the scope of the inquiry. Furthermore, it is outrageous that Christians are not extended the same consideration and tolerance as other religious, ethnic, cultural or sexually diverse groups.

I think it is unfair that outdated preconceived ideas about homeschooling as isolating were abundant during the inquiry. Homeschooled students learn collaboratively across every Key Learning Area (KLA).

I think it is unfair that homeschooled students are perceived as being at risk of child abuse, despite the fact that there is no evidence whatsoever to support this position.

Finally, I think it is unfair that homeschoolers have no representation within the governing authority. It is unfair that there is no process for consultation or for feedback. It is appalling to find oneself part of a misunderstood, maligned and voiceless minority in a country such as Australia. Where is the fair go for home schoolers?

In terms of funding, I believe that the primary responsibility of government is to provide public education, and they have done that. I value that I have the freedom to choose whether or not to access public education for my family. I do not expect the government to fund my choices. Neither do I expect that every cent of my taxes should be spent to benefit me or mine. I understand that we pay taxes into a collective purse, from which government at all levels provides many services. Some of these services I use, and many services I do not use, but value the existence of. This is part of living in community.

It is possible that some kind of rebate system providing a nominal amount of funding to home schoolers would be useful. Strategies such as this could improve access to resources for homeschooled students, as well as encourage families to engage with the registration process. This could take the form of rebates payable for low income earners or as tax deductions for families earning above the tax free threshold. A relatively small amount, for example, \$300 per student per term, for educational materials including musical instruments, tuition, computers, curriculum materials etc would make a significant difference for many families.

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Below follows a more detailed discussion of some areas of concern, raised during the inquiry into homeschooling.

## **Child Protection**

During the inquiry there was much discussion around child protection concerns and appropriate surveillance in this regard for home schooling. It was acknowledged by Ms Campbell, from FACS that there is no evidence to suggest that homeschooled children are at any increased risk of abuse. It was further acknowledged that risk of significant harm reports are made to FACS by any of a number of people other than teachers, who may be involved in a child's life.

There seemed to be some confusion around what information exchange implies. Chapter 16A of the child and young persons (care and protection) act, information exchange simply means that information has been shared between particular authorities in a lawful way. It is not the same thing as a Risk Of Significant Harm (ROSH) report to FACS.

As a mandatory reporter, a home schooler and a guardian of a child in out-of-home care, I have some perspective on these issues that I wish to share. Firstly, as a registered midwife, I am trained in the keep them safe reforms. I am a mandatory reporter; I interact with FACS on a very regular basis in the course of my work. I understand that child protection is a serious issue and would never seek to minimise this. I am also a long term home schooler, having home schooled my biological children and now a child in out-of-home care. As a homeschooler, I find it offensive and unfair that the home schooling community is considered "risky" in terms of child protection. There is no evidence to support this position. Ms Campbell from FACS stated this fact repeatedly during her presentation to the inquiry. However I am also a carer. Currently in my home I have a 10 year old boy who has been with us for over three years, and his 19 year old half-sister who joined us in January this year. Both of these children attended day care and public schools. The surveillance which was supposed to protect the children did not. The 19 year old attended public school for her entire education, and yet suffered neglect and abuse at home the whole time. The 10 year old attended several day care facilities, two public schools in his kindergarten year, and had already been in foster care and was known to FACS before starting school. He has been physically and emotionally abused and neglected. Surveillance at school did not protect him or help him. He did not come into my care due to intervention by teaching staff or FACS, but by intervention from family. Both of these young people live every day with the scars of their younger years. The system failed them. Given the finite resources of the child protection system, and the number of children requiring assistance, I cannot help but wonder if focusing unjustified child protection concerns on a section of the community with absolutely no evidence to support this is a worthwhile use of resources.

## **Consultation**

As acknowledged by Mr Murphy, there is no formalised consultative process between the BoSTES and the homeschooling community. Indeed, there is no process for feedback other than via the opinions of the AP's. Claiming that homeschoolers, as a group, prefer to have "a certain distance between themselves and the board" is a nonsense! Mr Murphy does not provide even anecdotal evidence to support this outrageous and insulting claim. I freely acknowledge that I speak only for myself: I would like consultation. Given that the petition of 10 000 signatures asked for consultation,

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I would interpret that as strong evidence that I am not alone in wanting consultation before changes are made.

Despite the repeated claims that there have been “no material changes” I have personally experienced changes. I was personally informed by the AP that learning that took place outside the home did not count towards my educational program, and consequently the certificate IV qualification my daughter was completing was discounted. I personally experienced rigid interpretation and application of stages and outcomes, whereas in previous registrations I had been commended for providing excellent and advanced education for my children.

### **HSC**

I would like to make it clear to the committee that the HSC is not available to homeschooled students. There is a limited capacity for students to undertake examinations in some subjects, which could then be used to generate an ATAR. The subjects in which this is possible are largely theoretical. It should also be noted that ongoing assessment tasks are not included in this process. So while a highschool student will undertake assessment in a variety of ways over an extended period, the homeschooled student is only able to access a final examination in a limited number of subjects. The value of this is therefore limited. I know of no one who has taken this pathway to further education.

That is not to say that home schooled students do not go on to tertiary study. Even cursory research will reveal a number of pathways. These include studies at TAFE, through OTEN or Open Universities, or through private providers. In our particular case, my daughter studied a certificate IV at the regional conservatorium of music, whereas my son studied a certificate IV at TAFE. Both have gone on to study at university. I know of many in the homeschooling community who have progressed to tertiary study using pathways such as these. Another possible pathway is via the alternate admission to university, in which a candidate sits the STAT test.

### **Naplan**

NAPLAN testing is possible for homeschooled students, however our family has never participated in this. In fact, even when my older children were attending school, we declined to participate in this. Standardised testing is of limited value to the students taking the tests, they are often more useful to governments in assessing the efficacy of their educational systems. It is not surprising then that in many years of homeschooling, I have met only one family who engaged with this type of testing.

A more useful measure of outcomes would be to perhaps include homeschooling in the data collection questions in the UAC application process. Or to undertake a survey of registered homeschoolers. Or simply to access the growing body of research regarding many aspects of the homeschooling experience.

### **Reasons to Homeschool**

In regards to the questions on the BoSTES form about why we choose to home educate, I must emphasise that they are optional. I never answer any of those questions. However, if independent,

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rigorous research were to be undertaken in a transparent way with appropriate consent and feedback, I would willingly participate. Perhaps the information the Committee is seeking is unavailable because the homeschool community has never been asked. Those data collection questions were simply added to the form with no consultation, no transparency of purpose, and no consent as to where or how such information would be used. It is no surprise then, that the response level to those questions is poor.

### **Home School Liaison**

Home School Liaison Program: despite what the name implies, this is nothing to do with homeschooling. This is the term used by Department of Education and Communities for the truancy officer. This is the enforcing arm of the Department when parents are not meeting their legal obligations in terms of compulsory schooling. They do not interact with registered homeschoolers at all.

### **Distance Education**

Questions were asked about access to distance education. Distance education is not easily accessible for most families; it is not a choice one simply makes. My own family accessed distance education due to medical conditions for one child. According to the NSW Public Schools website,

*“Distance education enrolments currently include:*

- *Students whose home is geographically isolated*
- *Students travelling within Australia*
- *Students temporarily resident or travelling overseas*
- *Students with certain medical conditions*
- *Students in extraordinary circumstances”*

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/rde/distanceedu/>

Distance education is not available to homeschooled students as single subjects, such as school students are able to access. Distance education is different to and discrete from homeschooling.

### **Collaborative learning**

The Chair expressed concern that collaborative learning is an element that could be missing from homeschooling. I do not believe this question was adequately answered in the inquiry. The question asked about research; I can make no comment on this. However, I can give examples of collaborative learning opportunities of which I have personal experience.

Collaborative learning occurs when a group of students comes together for educational purposes. According to Mr Smyth King, “it is around young people being able to work collaboratively together, work with others, share ideas, grow from ideas and the contributions that people have.” While it is

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commonly assumed that this occurs within schools, it cannot be assumed that it does not occur outside this setting. Even the most cursory examination of this topic proves this point. There are in fact a multitude of collaborative learning opportunities that occur across the state in after school extracurricular activities. My own children have participated in these activities for many years. We have experienced collaborative learning in music study, through participation in choirs, orchestras, bands and musicianship classes. In sports, through gymnastics, ice skating, rugby union, little athletics, tennis, riding for the disabled and cricket. In the visual arts in groups through the regional art gallery. Many children, regardless of whether they homeschool or not, experience collaborative learning such as this on a regular and ongoing basis, outside the institutional school setting.

Within the homeschooling community, collaborative learning also takes place. It occurs in formal and informal ways, in small groups and large groups. It can be a single event, such as a field trip, or a regular class that meets every week or every fortnight for a term, a semester or a year. Below I will provide a small list some of the collaborative learning experiences my own children have participated in within the homeschool community over the last 4 years, the key learning area (KLA) of focus, the approximate number of students, who facilitated the group, and whether it was a single event or an ongoing class. This list is by no means exhaustive, it represents events easily recalled by myself.

<b>Event/group</b>	<b>KLA</b>	<b>Number of students</b>	<b>Primary or secondary</b>	<b>Facilitated by</b>	<b>How often</b>
War memorial excursion	History	33	Primary and secondary	War memorial education staff	Once only
Aquafun boating	PDHPE	20	Secondary	Aquafun staff; supervised by homeschool parents	Twice per year
Opera house concerts	Music	5-40	Primary and secondary	Opera house, supervised by homeschool parents	annually
Twelfth night workshop	Drama & English	22	Primarily secondary	Bell Shakespeare theatre company	Once only
Koolang observatory dark sky show	Science	40	Primary and secondary	Koolang Observatory	annually
Talent cafe (performance opportunity)	Drama, music	150	Primary and secondary	In partnership with Regional Youth Support Services (RYSS)	annually
Drama class	Drama	13-18	Secondary	In partnership with RYSS	Weekly for two terms
Shakespeare set free	Drama, English, History	20	Primarily secondary	Homeschooling parents	Weekly for two terms
Art Class	Visual arts	12	Secondary	In partnership with RYSS	Weekly for one term

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Song writing class	Music	7	Secondary	In partnership with RYSS	Weekly for one term
Quilting class	Textiles and design	11	Primary and secondary	Taught by Jenelle Kent, of Pieces to Treasure	Fortnightly for two years
Homeschool magazine	English	10	Primarily secondary	Homeschooling parents	One magazine published every term for 6 term. Team meeting several times per edition
The big report – participating in collecting national weather data	Science	9	Primary and secondary	Homeschooling parents in collaboration with the Weather channel	Once only
Royal Easter Show	Science, history, agriculture, performance arts	10-50	Primary and secondary	Homeschooling parents in collaboration with education staff of the Royal Agricultural Society	Annually
Museum visit: China's first Emperor	History	40	Primary and secondary	Australia museum	Once only
Theatre visits	Drama	15 -50	Primary and secondary	Homeschooling parents, accessing community resources	Usually 2-6 visits annually, as available
Bike Riding	PDHPE	16	Secondary	Homeschooling parents	Once only
Tree Tops	PDHPE	100	Primary and secondary	Homeschooling parents in collaboration with Tree tops staff	Annually
Red & Gold; a history of Chinese immigration to Australia	History	10	Secondary	Sydney Learning adventures	Once only
Archery	PDHPE	30	Secondary	Feral Archery	Weekly for

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Wood working class	Technology	10	Secondary	Local wood working business	Weekly for one term
Picasso Exhibit	Visual Art	100	Primary and secondary	NSW Art Gallery & Homeschooling parents	Once only
Art classes	Visual Art	3	Primary	Homeschool parent	Fortnightly for one year
Drama class	Drama	30	Primary	Homeschool parent	Weekly for one term each year
Visual Art Class	Visual Art	20	Primary	Private tutor	Weekly for one term each year
Music Class	Music	20	Primary	Private tutor or homeschool parent	Weekly for one term each year
Dance Class	Dance	30	Primary	Private tutor or homeschool parent	Weekly for one term each year
Writing Class	English and History	50	Primary and secondary	Homeschool parent	Weekly
Choir	Music	40	Primary and secondary	Homeschool parent	Weekly
Public Speaking group	English	20	Mainly secondary	Homeschool parents	Weekly for one year
Sport	PDHPE	10-50	Primary and secondary	Homeschool parents	Weekly
Ad break	Film, drama, Music	10	Secondary	In partnership with RYSS	Weekly for one term
Photography	Photography, art	12	Secondary	In partnership with RYSS	Weekly for one term
Swan Lake Ballet performance	Dance, music, drama	40	Primary	Homeschool parent accessing community resources	Once only

Additionally, I am aware of other groups within the Homeschooling community, in which my own family does not participate. These include maths groups, science groups, social groups, excursions to the Jewish Museum, ice skating, farm school and so on. We regularly receive communication from nearby homeschool groups regarding large events such as sports or swimming carnivals. Homeschool parents are experts at accessing community resources and pooling their own resources to provide collaborative learning opportunities for their children. More than this, we model collaboration to our children in the planning and delivery of these opportunities. Collaborative learning outside the school setting is vibrant, ongoing and across every KLA. It occurs in groups both small and large. It is organised formally and informally. It occurs across age groups. It

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brings homeschooled students and their parents in contact with professional educators, youth services, private tutors and other homeschoolers. In my own experience, there are more opportunities for collaborative learning than we can participate in – we are certainly spoiled for choice. The idea of homeschooling as isolating is an outdated preconceived idea which needs to be recognised for what it is: prejudice.

### **Connectedness**

While I would wholeheartedly agree with the Department of Education and Communities, Mr Smyth King that children engaged with education are more likely to have improved outcomes later in life, I do not agree that connectedness is the same thing as attendance. Mr Lennox claims that Justice Wood intends us to think that connectedness is synonymous with attendance. “By connectedness he means enrolment in school and attending school”. Ms Campbell from FACS understood the same comments from Justice Wood to be referring to children receiving a good education and being connected to community, with a number of protective relationships in their lives. One would not need to look very far to identify students who are attending school and yet disconnected from education, as well as being socially isolated. As acknowledged by Ms Campbell, it is possible to be attending school and still be isolated. Attendance is a very narrow definition of connectedness. In fact, according to the education act if a homeschooler is registered, they are by definition attending. Following this line of reasoning, then they also are experiencing connectedness. However, I believe that connectedness is much more than that.

According to Wikipedia, social connectedness is the measure of how people come together and interact. The Farlex dictionary defines connectedness as “related by family; associated with or related to others”. The kids matter website, (<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/health-and-community/resources-families/mental-health-basics/belonging-and-connectedness>) an initiative of the Australian Government, talks about connectedness and belonging together. In fact, many of the suggestions from this website about ways that school and families can improve a sense of belonging and connectedness are things that homeschooling families do every day. Things such as focusing on family and child strengths, making friends, ensuring that the learning community is a supportive and welcoming place, having friendships with children older and younger than themselves, and knowing and trusting the teacher -in the homeschool context, the parent is ideally placed to achieve this. According to kids matter, a sense of belonging is very important for children’s mental health and well being. Homeschooled students gain this sense of belonging in their families, in the homeschooling community, within their groups of multi-age friends, and in the wider community. Connectedness and school attendance are not synonymous; to claim otherwise is to minimise the significance of this important predictor of child health.

### **Sexually diverse young people**

It was apparent that the Hon. Trevor Khan was very interested in how homeschooling may affect one particular minority, being sexually diverse young people. He asked witnesses to comment on a series of documents, *Writing Themselves In*, which the witnesses had not read. I have taken the time to review the most recent of those documents, *Writing themselves In 3*. In questioning the department of Education and Communities representative, the Hon Trevor Khan stated that young people were more likely to seek support and help from teachers or other students, than from



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parents. He made similar assertions when questioning Mr Brearley. There were concerns about where young people might gain support and information, outside of the school system.

*Writing Themselves in 3* tells us that 61% of sexually diverse young people reported verbal abuse because of homophobia, and 18% experienced physical abuse as a result of their sexuality (p 39). Of these, 80% named school as the place of abuse (p ix; p 39). It goes on to report that levels of homophobic violence in schools are increasing (p ix). More than half of the study participants reported that homophobic abuse impacted negatively on their schooling (px), including changing schools, leaving school early, difficulty concentrating on their studies and the need to hide from peers at recess and lunchtime (p xi). This group of young people live with the expectation of violence and abuse, and have no expectation of help from bystanders, teachers, parents or police (p49). When talking about abuse, young people often talked about it taking place at school and about the lack of assistance from teachers (p46). Only 19% identified their school as supportive, while over one third described their school as homophobic (p 79). Another effect of the homophobic abuse suffered by these young people was that they were more likely to feel unsafe everywhere (p 49).

*Writing Themselves In 3* found that young people were most likely to disclose to friends, with internet friends also being a significant avenue of disclosure (p x). The study found that the group young people were least likely to disclose to were professionals (p 71). The majority of young people had support from parents they had disclosed to (p 69) Repeatedly, the internet was identified as an important source of both information and support (p59).

In accessing information regarding relevant sex education, the internet was again identified as significant. Sadly, fewer than one in five had access to this information at school (p82).

Given these findings, it is possible that homeschooling may be a safer option for many sexually diverse young people. Homeschooled young people have friends, and access to the internet. Additionally, they may come into contact with community organisations which are supportive of sexually diverse young people, such as youth services or youth health such as Headspace. Within our own homeschooling community, we have partnered repeatedly with the Regional Youth Support Services, who advocate and provide support for sexually diverse young people. Within my family, my teens have accessed primary health care through youth health services. We have managed to navigate the turbulent teen years with honest and close relationships with our children. Additionally, they have healthy, intact relationships with a diverse group of people. These are young people who are able to access whatever support is needed.