

Submission
No 264

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 8/08/2014

Partially Confidential

To The Director, Select Committee on Home Schooling,

I am writing to you regarding the NSW Parliamentary Homeschooling Inquiry.

We have been registered home educators since 2009, first in NSW and then interstate when we relocated.

We began home educating with a school-at-home model, which did not work for us as “teachers” or the children as learners. Despite having planned an interesting curriculum with varied topics, it was boring and lacked true interest and engagement for all of us. It quickly became apparent that learning in that style became the same chore for the children at home as it had been at school. Having been educated in mainstream and private schools and both being tertiary educated, my husband and I needed time to discover new ways of learning and our children required the same opportunity. Over time, as we watched our children grow and educated ourselves about their individual learning styles, we developed more confidence in our abilities to support our children as they followed their passions. We also developed trust that our children would learn what they needed to know at the appropriate stage, and so we evolved to a much more child-led learning model – that which is widely known as “unschooling”.

Unschooling works for us because *all* children have an innate curiosity about the world and everything in it. If given the opportunity to explore their interests, they cover a surprising number of key learning areas and educational outcomes doing both ordinary and extraordinary things. The seemingly simple act of planning and cooking a meal covers at least five key learning areas – English, HSIE, PDHPE, science and mathematics. Children who learn in a more natural, interest-based manner learn an amazing amount at a much deeper level, with a better retention of information and knowledge, than many of their schooled counterparts.

Our older children have attended mainstream school and have been home educated. Our younger children have been fully home educated. We cannot see any significant benefit that schooling gave to our older children, despite having believed strongly in the school system at the beginning of our their education, when compared to our younger children. When asked about their schooling experience, our now-teenagers cite bullying by a few of their peers, despite having been well-liked and accepted in their school, unintentional but very real humiliation by well-meaning teachers who clearly do not understand the many different learning styles and multiple intelligences of students, and a disappointing crushing of their confidence in learning, which has taken many years to heal. One of our older children scored above the school, state and national averages in a NAPLAN mathematics test with little to no knowledge or understanding of the concepts of maths, which showed us very clearly that despite her above-average intelligence, she was being left behind in the school system.

There is a widely held view in our society that home educated, particularly unschooled, children cannot read and write, or read and write at a lower level or considerably later than their schooled same-aged peers. It is a view that is flawed and incorrect. Our school-aged children can all read – even the child with dyslexia. Our older two were 7 years old and 5 years old respectively when they began to read fluently. Our dyslexic child was 10 years old when she began to read fluently, and our next child was 7 years

old. None of those ages are outside of what would be expected of or acceptable for a mainstream-schooled child.

Another common myth relates to the quality of the educational achievement of home educated children. "There has been much research that concludes that children whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to achieve academically (Mayberry and Knowles, 1989; Simmons, 1994; Lines, 1995)." (<http://education.qld.gov.au/publication/production/reports/homeschooling.pdf> page 19). Parental involvement is actually at a maximum when parents choose to educate their own children.

In our own experience, having completed Year 10 as an unschooler, our eldest child decided to pursue formal Year 11 and 12 studies with a heavy emphasis on sciences for which a child cannot sit exams if home educated. He enrolled in a Distance Education (DE) school and discovered, despite having experienced a much more informal education prior to enrolling in the DE school, that transitioning to a more structured style of education was quite easy and he has enjoyed his studies. His research and thinking skills are beyond many of his schooled peers.

There is a common misconception that home educated children lack opportunities for socialisation and risk isolation. Nothing could be further from the truth for most home educated children. Our own children socialise easily and happily. They are connected to our local community and the wider world and take part in community events and those further afield in their areas of interest. They socialise and interact with a wide range of people from a variety of backgrounds and ages, not just their same-aged peers. They are self-motivated and able to explore a wide range of situations in a confident manner, whether individually or as part of a team. Our older children have travelled independently both domestically and internationally. I receive comments on a regular basis, from those whom we know as well as strangers, about how easy our children are to talk to, what interesting people they are and how they are intelligent, knowledgeable, resourceful, resilient and skilful in ways rarely seen in others their age.

An argument which is often heard when people complain about or question the validity of home education is that those who are home educated, particularly those who are unschooled, will be unsuitable for the workforce, which is completely untrue. Our older children are now at the stage where they are completing late secondary education, with a view to tertiary study, as well as part-time paid employment. They have a wide range of interests and are sought by employers, as they are articulate, socially adept and able to work at a high level, with focus and maturity not seen in many young people. Both work part-time and one has taken on a managerial role in her workplace because of her time-management and social skills, reliability and maturity.

I have heard and read stories of the risk of abuse being perceived as greater for home educated children. According to a report from the 2003 Queensland Review of Home Schooling, there were a number of myths about home schooling identified, one of which was the children who are home educated are more likely to be subject to abuse of some kind and that it will go unnoticed by authorities because of a lack of regulation and overseeing the child's development. The report states, "A third myth relates to issues of child protection. The argument sometimes put is that home schooled children by virtue of their perceived "social isolation", are more at risk than their schooled peers to various forms of child abuse. The argument is largely constructed on the absence of a teacher who is now required to report any evidence of apparent child abuse to the Principal of a school. These arguments and their derivatives are spurious. There is no evidence, reputable research or judicial data to support this position.' Furthermore, the report argues that the same standards are not applied to many schooled children, "The same argument is not applied to the thousands of students who are educated in State and non-

State schools of distance education. The argument often stems from an absence of understanding of what is home schooling and a confusion of this with issues of parental neglect, truancy from a school that a child is enrolled at and should be attending on a full and regular basis, children lost to any system, process or program of education and parental and familial abuse of children. The *Child Protection Act 1999* and the *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000* are the appropriate legislative instruments for addressing children at risk of harm. “
(<http://education.qld.gov.au/publication/production/reports/homeschooling.pdf> page 20).

When we began home educating our children, one side of our family, who had a longstanding belief that private school education is the only worthwhile education, were opposed to our decision to educate our children ourselves. My husband was educated in an exclusive private school and it was assumed that we would want the same for our own children. They made life incredibly difficult for us, including sending uninvited prospectuses for various schools and making suggestions of how they thought our children ought to be educated. They tried to undermine us at every turn and it became a difficult and stressful situation to see or hear from family. We withdrew from them for all other than essential contact.

We attended a family wedding in September 2010 and our family had the opportunity to watch our children in action, interacting with other family members as well as strangers. They commented to us how they were impressed by their manner and behaviour, especially when compared to the other cousins of similar ages. They mentioned how intelligent their conversations and opinions were and at that point, when faced with the real results of home education, they softened their perspective of home education and have accepted it as a viable option since.

The difference in registration requirements between states is significant and it was with a sigh of relief that we were able to leave the onerous and stressful NSW home education registration system. That home education in NSW is so heavily regulated is completely unnecessary. Heavy regulation, monitoring and reporting does not improve educational outcomes. In fact, it is more likely to place an increasing burden on families and significant stress on home educating parents. I am quite sure that heavy regulation and stringent rules on what constitutes learning prevents many families from wanting to register, despite it being a legal requirement. Inflexible Authorised Persons with little actual knowledge and no direct experience of home education, who act outside of the Education Act and are known to refuse registration on insignificant grounds, do not help families in any way. It is absurd that any authorising agency would send representatives with absolutely no experience in the field to inspect and authorise or decline applicants.

Parents who choose to home educate their children are far from neglectful to their child's development in any way. The opposite is actually true. Home education requires a huge investment of resources, finances and time for every home educating family, whether they follow a set curriculum or a more flexible, natural approach. I respectfully request that the rules and regulations for home educators in NSW be relaxed and brought in line with those in Victoria or Queensland, which are much fairer for all home educators. It is also essential that there be several BOSTES representatives, Authorised Persons and Board members who have direct and relevant experience of home education to ensure that there is a fair and equitable system for all home educating families in NSW.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Yours faithfully,