

Submission
No 241

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

Recommendation 1

That an independent body to oversee home education be established. This body must include home educators and would be directly responsible to the Minister for Education. This independent body should be modelled on the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council (THEAC).

Recommendation 2

That the current registration requirements are withdrawn and that appropriate registration, not regulation, is implemented. This revised registration should be based on the Tasmanian model.

Recommendation 3

That home educators have access to educational support services which are currently available to those in the school system such as access to hospital school, travel passes, TAFE, TVET courses.

Introduction

Originally, our intentions were for our children to go to school all the way, preferably private school. Our son and daughter were enrolled in the local Catholic school and were most likely going to move on to the Catholic high school in our area.

Before I was compelled to look at home education, I knew very little about home education and my opinion was very narrow-minded. From discussions I have had with a variety of people, many people today believe, as I did, that home education is only for those leading an alternative lifestyle, that children miss out on social experiences and that the education could not be one of quality. These ideas are also quite often expressed in the media.

After commencing home education, I soon realised how mistaken I was. I discovered that home education is a bona fide form of education with home educators being a diverse, modern and well educated group of people.

We have been home educating for 6 years now. Our son is 15 and our daughter is 12. It has been a very positive experience.

I make this submission on behalf of myself, my husband and my son and daughter.

I would like to comment on the following terms of reference:

1. (a) the background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand,

E-brief issue 7/2013, Home Education in NSW by Talina Drabsch thoroughly documents home education in Australia and covers the practices of each of the states as well as New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

NSW is the most heavily regulated state in Australia and places an emphasis on documentation whilst most other states, such as Victoria and Tasmania, accept that the parent has the capacity to create, implement and record a quality education program.

Home education is not a new concept. In fact, for centuries home education was the only option available for most families, especially the poor.

Home education is a sound form of education and needs due credit. It is an essential component in the education of our nation. Home education facilitates diversity and also overcomes shortcomings of mainstream schooling.

(b) the current context of home schooling in New South Wales including:

(i) outcomes of home schooling including in relation to transition to further study and work

Outcomes for our family

Our family has experienced many positive outcomes as a result of home education. These include:

- Our relationships with each other are much stronger as we have a large involvement in our children's day to day lives.
- We have a greater awareness and understanding of what our children are currently studying and enjoying. We are involved in a great many discussions and activities outside of "school hours".
- As parents, we accompany our children on excursions, to events and to social gatherings. We therefore have a greater understanding of what our children are learning or experiencing plus we have the opportunity for enjoyment and our own learning along the way.
- We now see home education as an extension of parenting. We can address issues as they arise rather than wait until after school or weekends. We can incorporate our values and belief systems into our education practices. We can address sensitive areas/issues in the privacy of our own home.
- Due to the success of their education, our children are much happier being home educated than they were at school. We no longer bear the brunt of their discontent and unhappiness.

Outcomes for our son

Home education has had the greatest benefit for our son as he has learning difficulties. We can only see positive outcomes, which include:

- Our son has made great improvements in literacy and numeracy since commencing home education. We strongly believe that his current standard in literacy and numeracy would not have been achieved had he stayed at mainstream school.
- Our son no longer suffers from self confidence issues. Due to the pressure of school and his own sense of feeling inadequate and, quite frankly, feeling stupid, our son was quite introverted at school and was reluctant to socialise with children and adults outside of the family. Positive changes were obvious shortly after our son was withdrawn from school and he now enjoys social interaction and has no hesitation in engaging in conversation with anyone being that a peer or an adult.
- Our son is no longer at risk of harm. Our son is very sensitive and is aware that he has learning difficulties. One of our greatest fears was that, if our son had an unsuccessful education, felt humiliated by this and had feelings of inadequacy and stupidity, he was at

risk of self harm or even taking his own life. Our son now has a strong sense of self worth and is very happy teenager.

- We were able to provide an appropriate one to one remedial program. Although our son had been receiving some support at school and was promised more, this was not one to one, was infrequent and, as we subsequently learned, was not appropriate. Before we withdrew our son from school, we devised, with the assistance of an education consultant, an appropriate remedial program for literacy and numeracy and this required an approach very different from the methods used in the school.
- Our son has many medical appointments and at the moment he has an average of 3 appointments per week which are a fair distance from our home. We can accommodate these appointments without great interruption to his education.
- Our son is able to learn at his own pace. The pressure of constant assessment has been removed and we can ensure that our son understands a topic before he moves on.
- Our son is able to study subjects that he is interested in. Our son has a great interest in history, both ancient and modern. We allow him to indulge in that as much as possible.
- Our son has had a great many experiences through home education. These include excursions to museums, theatres, galleries, concert halls, science festivals and swimming and athletics carnivals. Although mainstream schools do participate in some of these excursions as well, they would not have as many opportunities to attend as our son does. For example, this year our son has already seen (and subsequently studied) 3 Shakespeare plays.
- Our son no longer sees learning as a negative experience.

Outcomes for our daughter

Although our daughter does not have a learning difficulty she was not thriving in the classroom. She was not reading and writing to the expectation of the teacher. We observed that she was becoming unsettled in the school environment and that her behaviour at home had changed for the worse. Again, we can only see positive outcomes which include:

- Our daughter has been able to learn at her own pace. Although our daughter had a great interest in listening to stories, she had no desire to read and resisted all attempts to start her reading. We allowed her reading to develop naturally and now she is a great reader and reads from age appropriate novels every day.
- Our daughter no longer has a fear of failure. The pressure of comparison with others has been removed. We have encouraged our daughter to accept that mistakes are part of learning.
- Our daughter is also able to study subjects she is interested in and is therefore engaged in her studies.
- Our daughter has had a great many experiences though home education as noted for our son.
- Our daughter no longer has a negative opinion of learning.

Transition to further study and work

We do not anticipate that our children will have any difficulty transitioning to further study and work. We believe that the education and experiences we offer them will adequately prepare them for the future.

As our children develop a clearer picture regarding their intentions for their future, we can offer them opportunities to support them.

Also, our children currently have monthly magazine delivery rounds. We intend to encourage them to explore alternative or additional part-time jobs when they are ready to do so.

(ii) financial costs,

We see that financial costs include the following:

- The cost of delivering the home education program
- Salary forgone by a parent in order to home educate
- Savings to the government
- Financial benefit to society

The costs of delivering our home education program include resources, materials and equipment, external classes and excursions. Our greatest expenses are books, external classes and excursions. We find resources can be accessed quite cheaply, if not free, through the internet, the local library, museums, galleries or the graciousness of other home educators. Books are an indulgence as we probably could access most of them through the library. Some excursions and classes have been free, but when they are not the cost is between \$10 and \$30 per child per event or class. In addition to what would be deemed extra curricula, our children would attend approximately 2 events per month with our daughter attending an additional 2 classes per week.

The forgone salary is a large component of our financial cost of home education. A conservative estimate of the forgone full-time income is \$100,000 per annum.

There are savings to the government in that there is no funding for home education and the saving of not funding the child in school.

There is a financial benefit to society with regard to our son. If he had remained in mainstream school and was not having a successful education, he would eventually become a welfare burden.

(iii) demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children,

Demographics

We have found that home educating families are a very diverse group coming from a variety of backgrounds, cultures and religions. We have met families who are first or second generation migrants from all over the world, for example, India, Korea, Sweden, America, China, United Kingdom, New Zealand, Germany and South America. We have met families who are atheist, Christian, Buddhist and Hindu.

We have also found that home educators have vastly different financial circumstances.

For us, we roughly fit the middle class white Australian stereotype. My parents migrated from Germany, my husband's mother migrated from England and my husband's father can trace his ancestry back to the First Fleet.

My husband is the general manager for a company which manufactures and imports construction equipment. Up until I commenced home educating, I was the personal assistant to a high profile investment banker.

Motivation

Ultimately, every parent wants their child to have a quality, successful education and our motivation was just that.

Our son was failing at school and the best option to meet his needs was home education. This meant challenging our own preconceptions about home education. It also meant giving up one income and a career. Our decision to home educate was made only after exhausting all other avenues. This shows that the decision was not made lightly.

Our son struggled at school from day 1. He repeated kindergarten even though he turned 7 in that year. We consulted paediatricians and received speech and occupational therapy after school. Our son managed the second year of kindergarten and year 1 but things deteriorated in year 2. His year 2 teacher told me he was failing but, when I asked what I could do, she answered that I was doing everything I could. Our son was terribly unhappy as he knew he wasn't managing and he couldn't remedy the problem. Trying harder wasn't what was required. Endless meetings ensued, with the school principal placating us by telling us that our sons' education was in their hands. The principal was to draw up a plan for our son and we trusted that she knew what she was doing. However, we became increasingly frustrated by months of inaction and sought advice from an education consultant. After assessments etc, the advice we received from the education consultant was, if we really wanted to help our son, we should home educate him. The education consultant recommended a remedial plan which was, essentially, to start from scratch and to take a completely different approach.

After investigating all other options and resisting home education, at the beginning of first term of year 3 we asked the school if they would accommodate part-time attendance. The school reluctantly agreed to this for one term only in which our son would be at home in the morning for literacy and numeracy and then go to school at lunch time for a play and then the afternoon classes.

Our son made great progress and the arrangement was working well. However, we knew the principal would not extend the part-time arrangement. I explained this to our son and gave him the option of returning to school full-time or being home educated full-time. He chose home education.

A defining moment came when our son and I arrived at the school one afternoon to collect his sister and our son's former class was playing sport on the oval. Our son told me how much he missed his class. I asked our son if I had made a mistake by taking him out of school and asked him if he wanted to go back. His exact words were "I miss them Mum but I don't want to go back". We had made the right decision.

We intended to only home school for approximately 12 months, hoping to have remedied our son's learning difficulties in that time. Time went by and our son thrived, becoming confident and he was

no longer crippled by the fear of failure. His progress was rapid and he started to read. The thought of the return to school got further and further away.

At the time we withdrew our son from school, our daughter was in year 1. She wasn't thriving and was having difficulty with reading and writing. Her teacher didn't have an appreciation for difficulties a child might experience such as visual processing or auditory processing issues. She also didn't have an appreciation that the issue might not be developmental delay but rather a matter of timing. Our daughter expressed a desire to be home educated as well and so the decision was made to withdraw her from school before the end of term 3.

Our son still has learning difficulties but is thriving in the home education environment. He is reading well and frequently and his favourite subject is history. Our daughter's difficulties passed very quickly and she is also thriving in the home education environment with her favourite activities being reading, pottery, drama and ice skating.

We do give our children the option to return to school with our blessing should they wish and ask them regularly. The answers to date have always been no.

(v) characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children,

Our children's characteristics and education needs are much the same as children attending mainstream school.

There are many children with learning difficulties in mainstream school and we have provided for our sons needs in our home education program.

Our children are given many opportunities to learn in and out of the home and in many different forms.

Our children enjoy being with other children and they have the opportunity to do so frequently whether it be at home education activities and events, general public classes and groups or simply being with their friends.

We firmly believe that children need to be interested to learn successfully. We have found that an eclectic approach to home education is most suitable for our children. We have structured learning time and take a structured approach in mathematics and a fairly structured approach in English but are more "organic" in our approach to the other key learning areas. For example, we study art when we visit exhibitions, our study of history might be prompted by an anniversary, a documentary or a special exhibition, our study of geography or politics might be prompted by an event in the news, we study Shakespeare when we see a play, we discuss books all the time. We do not limit our education to what might be prescribe for their year. We take opportunities and follow interests as they present themselves.

We find that this approach does cover the key learning areas. If we are lacking in a particular KLA, we create the opportunity.

As a result, the children have a very rich education. We often think there are simply not enough hours in a day to allow us to cover everything we might like to.

(vi) comparison of home schooling to school education including distance education

As detailed in the previous section, our home education practice is very different from school education and distance education. School education and distance education practices accommodate neither different methodologies nor a deviation from the prescribed curriculum.

From our experience, school education does not accommodate learning difficulties very well.

The one to one or one to two scenario is vastly different to one to 25 or so. With home education, more time is spent learning than is possible in the classroom situation.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

(i) current registration processes and ways of reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers,

As the current registration process is inappropriate, burdensome, discouraging and focuses on form over substance, it is understandable that families choose not to register.

An appropriate registration process, such as that used in Tasmania, would encourage families to register.

Also, families would be encouraged if authorised persons had a support role rather than an inspector role.

(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons,

We have had the experience of a delightful authorised person. She has an excellent understanding of home education and is very supportive of home education. My observation was that she was measuring our capacity and our means to home educate. I also believe she can make a judgement very quickly about whether or not a child is receiving a quality education based on work samples and discussions.

I have heard from other home educators that this has not been their experience, that the focus has been on form over substance and that the authorised person was discouraging.

It is imperative that all authorised persons take the approach such as that of the authorised person we experienced. This approach would save much time and angst.

(iv) potential benefits or impediments to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing,

With absolutely no doubt, home schooling has been a benefit to our children's safety, welfare and wellbeing.

As you would have read in this submission, our son's welfare and wellbeing has significantly improved and we no longer fear that he is at risk of self harm.

We have found home education environments to be positive, friendly and supportive and the families to be the same.

We have also found that the home education community is very supportive and looks out for one another in all regards not just education.

(vi) appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved,

The current regulatory regime is unacceptable as the regulations have been made without consultation and without an appreciation of the unique nature of home education.

The current regulations focus on form over substance. There is an excessive burden of administration in complying with the current regulations and the registration process is discouraging.

An independent body to oversee home education must be established. This body must include home educators and would be directly responsible to the Minister of Education. This independent body should be modelled on the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council (THEAC).

(d) support issues for home schooling families and barriers to accessing support,

Currently, the only support available to home educating families in NSW is that from other home educating families as well as the home educators within the Home Education Association and the Sydney Home Education Network.

Home educators do not have equal access to opportunities that children in the public and private school system have such as TAFE, TVET courses, Open High School and the School Sports Program. This is unjust and these opportunities must be made available.

As you would have read in this submission, the part-time schooling arrangement was a success for our son. Part-time schooling should be made available as it is in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

(e) representation of home schoolers within Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES), and

Even though BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW, there is no member representing home educators on the Board. Public, Catholic and independent schools are represented on the Board.

BoSTES is not the appropriate body to oversee home education as home education is significantly different from mainstream school.

It is imperative that an independent body to oversee home education be established. This body must include home educators and would be directly responsible to the Minister for Education.

Until such time as an independent body is established, home educators must be represented on BoSTES.

(f) any other related matter.

Much of the fear of home education surrounds the idea that children will fall through the gaps. Whilst that is possible, we would like to compare that to the number of children falling through the gaps in mainstream school.

If a parent wanted the easy way out, they would send their child to school.

Parents today are well equipped to home educate. They have their own education, upbringing, experiences and self education to draw upon.

Parents are in a unique position because of their great love for their child and their desire to see their child succeed. Home educators make a huge personal investment in their child's education.

Thank you for your consideration.