

**Submission
No 115**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

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

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

(ii) financial costs,

Firstly it should be said, there is no financial gain in home schooling. In fact, home schooling parents save the government a lot of money by taking the onus of their children's education costs on themselves. This is often at significant cost to the family as, in many cases, only one parent is able to work and/or their career must be put on hold or abandoned altogether. As taxpayers, I believe that home schoolers are prepared to bear that cost in order to provide the education and lifestyle that they believe is beneficial for their children. Obviously, those choosing this option think it an important decision.

There are inconsistencies, however, when the home schooling family is compared with the wider community, in their ability to access Centrelink payments for low income families and, in my case, a Health card. One of my children, who suffers anaphylaxis and previously qualified for a Health card, upon reaching 17, as he was neither working toward a HSC nor could be registered as 'Home schooled', could no longer access this benefit despite being a full time student and dependent.

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

As a family we have been officially home schooling for 14 years and have found it a wonderful fit for our family. We have four children; 20, 18, 14 and 12 years of age. Many factors influenced our initial decision to home school; the most important were creating a rich and cohesive family life, fostering a life-long love of learning, and ensuring that the elements of education which we most highly valued were communicated in full with no 'holes' in the learning process.

As we have continued the journey and become more confident in leading and mentoring our kids, we have had no reason to question this decision. We have been able to focus our schooling on the individual child's interests and strengths, as well as being able to encourage growth in their weaker areas. This is particularly helpful as the children are not comparing themselves with their peers but just able to concentrate on self-improvement. Additionally, home schooling has provided us with time to work through personal conflicts and behaviour issues, consider our community and how we can contribute, and discuss in depth, the major issues in the world we live in (e.g. as they arise on the news or discussion).

My husband is a Paramedic with the New South Wales Ambulance Service and, before the arrival of my fourth child, I was a Registered Nurse. We have a passion for helping and caring for people and love our country very much and wanted to share this with our children. Because we are home during school hours we have been able to participate in community care (e.g. helping sick and elderly relatives, regularly participating in the local soup kitchen etc.). Home schooling has given us the freedom to explore Australia and we have had many extended camping holidays exploring this wide country. We have found our children find every moment a learning experience and these holidays have immersed them in the beauty and history of, not only Australia, but those countries which have influenced our discovery and culture.

As the older two children reached 15 or 16 years of age, their interests were refined and we were able to tailor their schooling toward the careers they wished to undertake. Both are now in tertiary education and have applied themselves fully to reaching their goals.

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

Our children are all happy and well adjusted. They have all enjoyed pursuing their interests and having 'space to learn'; when a task or skill has been difficult to grasp they have had the time to work at it and master it before moving on.

As mentioned, our eldest son has severe allergies and being home schooled has allowed him to work in a 'safe' environment. As an adult, he is able to manage his allergies and is not fearful of having a reaction; he was very anxious during his time at preschool. The option of home schooling him has had a significant positive effect on his development.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

In the earlier years of my home schooling experience, I found the registration process to be a very helpful time in the year. I would use this time to solidify the direction I wanted to take with the children and would find the process supported that. This has changed over time and has become much more stressful as more and more emphasis has been given to strictly adhering to the curriculum and less to the individual child's interests and development. Whereas, the APs (Authorised Person) used to encourage and suggest areas that may need more substance, the APs are now wholly focused on Outcomes and the process is not important.

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

I have always found the APs to be friendly and courteous. In my earlier experiences, the APs were very supportive of home schooling and in understanding reasons individuals chose to home school. They encouraged diversity and different home schooling methods, having obviously seen great results from the process. I don't believe that the newer APs have this conception and it is to everyone's detriment.

(iii) adherence to delivery of the New South Wales Syllabuses,

I use the NSW Syllabuses as a guide to ensure we are covering at least the basics of learning, however, I find it very constricting. That is, I want a rich and alive learning palate for my children; and one that builds concept upon concept and as the child is ready to proceed, I want to be ready to go on. I have found the emphasis on Australian History particularly onerous. In saying this, we cover all the 'outcomes' because our lifestyle lends itself to learning (particularly reading 'living' books). I think it is a burden when home schooling, in that, the teaching parent is well aware of where their child is 'at' educationally, they daily see the improvements and the hurdles and are acutely aware of what is the 'next step'. They know what the child has learnt/discussed/struggled with, not just this

year but in all the years that they have been home educated. We have always encouraged critical thinking and creativity as opposed to rote facts. This is the joy of home schooling; not leaving out the facts but using them to think about the future and opening up questions and discussion as a result. This surely benefits society as a whole.

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

As mentioned, home schooling has particularly been of benefit for my child with allergies. But apart from this, home schooling provides a wonderful, rich, safe and secure environment for our children. They are part of our family and know they are valued as they contribute, not only to the running of the household but also to the community. As they are mostly with kids and adults of varying ages, they have developed cross-generational social skills and are, therefore, confident and able to express themselves in most situations. They have also developed a keen sense of empathy for others and have learnt to enjoy their own company as well as the company of others of any age.

Not having grown up with a great deal of peer pressure and/or competition in the classroom, they are self-motivated and confident to do something 'outside the square'. They have very rarely encountered any form of oppression (e.g. bullying and/or abuse). This has been a definite advantage to home schooling.

In regard to John Kaye's comments regarding the vulnerability to abuse of such children, I would like to point out that home schooled children are not isolated from the world. They are part of a community, with neighbours and friends. If these close people are unable to identify abuse in a child then I cannot see how attending school would increase identity of abuse. That is, I do not believe that they are at any higher risk of having unidentified abuse than children attending school. In fact, I would suggest that although home schoolers may meet with less people during the week, at the times they do get together, the intimacy of these relationships are conducive for seeing and dealing with problems (including suspected abuse). Further, most children have out of home activities; that is they are in ballet classes, soccer teams etc. where, if abuse was occurring would give opportunity for that to be picked up.

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

I am completely for appropriate regulation for home schooling; where the parent is able to navigate the best educational methods and content for their child(ren). This regulation would ensure that the home schooled family were supported and encouraged to spot any 'holes' in their education plans.

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

As a home educator, I would like to see access for home educated children to support which is currently available to students in public and private schools. For example, TVET courses, Open High School, School Sports Programs, Hospital School programs and support programs for students with a disability. I would like to see discussed other pathways into tertiary education that seem to be available to schooled children. For example, an ATAR, however low, allows entry to tertiary institutions. I would like to see an entry option for home schooled children which involves portfolio and/or testing, depending on the course.

A supportive attitude from the NSW government, and, in particular, the BOS, to parents who take the time to home educate would be a great encouragement. My experiences with the BOS and even the home schooling office of the BOS have not always been positive as many misunderstandings exist. As with most things, education on the positive outcomes of home education would be valuable in minimising this.

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

I believe that a better understanding of the benefits of home education, as well as an advocacy for the families which have undertaken this option, would be achieved in part by requiring that the BoSTES had a member that represents the home education community. The 23 members currently on the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards, cover all other areas of education. A home education representative, would be an asset to this board; hopefully broadening attitudes and reducing conflict.

(f) any other related matter.

Home schooling offers parents a wonderful opportunity to mentor their children and create a family environment which fosters a love for learning. It is imperative that it remain an option for parents for many reasons. Sometimes it is beneficial for just a season (e.g. allowing children who are having difficulty at school with content, educational style, physical or emotional problems, bullying etc., to regroup before parents determine the best option for their child), for just primary school (i.e. allowing a more relaxed pace for the infants/primary years in a secure environment), or for the long term. In my case, I have now two adult children who have 'graduated' from home schooling and are in tertiary education. They are money wise, socially competent and part of the community; contributing to society. Their home schooled friends have also pursued their interests with creative zeal and are either exceptional, interested tertiary students or working hard in their area of expertise. None are a 'drain on society' but rather are contributing to the community and economy of our country.