

**Submission  
No 171**

## **INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING**

**Name:** Ms Vivienne Fox

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Vivienne Fox

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.”

Robert Frost

When our children were approaching the age at which, traditionally, children begin school education, my husband I chose instead to take a different path, and to instead, home educate. We now have 5 children and have been home educating for over 15 years, and belong to a large and diverse home educating network.

I write this submission as a home educating parent of many years' experience. In that time, our older children have graduated and gone on to further education, and beyond, and our family has benefitted greatly in many ways. In addition, I have been extensively involved in the home education community, organising activities, supporting other home educators, helping many new home educators get started, and more recently, I have been involved in helping many home educators, both new and experienced through the registration process which has become extremely onerous. I am an HEA Committee member, and have been extensively involved in writing the HEA submission to this inquiry, and in helping people who have been adversely affected by BoSTES policies.

I am very thankful that we now have the opportunity of clarifying for Parliament the high level of commitment of home educating parents, the excellent outcomes of home education, and the dearth of support from our both government and society at large, due to the lack of understanding of our community. I hope that this inquiry will lead to an improved system of registration, built on a better understanding of home education, and providing a reasonable measure of support, and access to helpful resources for our

children, should they wish to access them. Thank you for your time in considering our submissions.

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

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

Home education is subject to many misconceptions. Although it is the oldest form of education, it is vastly misunderstood. It is well recognised that parental involvement is the key to academic success in children<sup>1</sup>, and also in raising happy, healthy, citizens. However, home educators are often viewed with suspicion, and the practice of home education fills people with doubt. “ Will the children have friends?”, “How will they enter further education, and eventually have a career?”, and “How will they find out about other people, who have different beliefs and a world view unlike that of their family?” are common questions home educators face. These questions may stem from the difficulties people face in considering such a different approach to the mainstream education that has become so widespread, and also from considering practices in other areas of the world, particularly the US, where home education has been prevalent for such a long time.

It is important to note that home education in Australia is quite different from home education in the US - although there are families who home educate from a perspective of religious belief, there is not the strong culture of Christian home education that exists in the US, and there are many families who home educate for completely different reasons, and Christians who home educate, not because they feel that it is important to shelter their children from other belief systems, but because they feel that this will provide the very best education for their children, with a range of benefits academically, socially and personally. In Australia today, the home educating community is extremely diverse. There are many ways in which home educators provide good networks for their children, so they may have friends and acquaintances of many ages, and with a range of beliefs. There are many pathways home educated students pursue that enable

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<sup>1</sup> Emerson L, Fear J, Fox S, Sanders E. Parental engagement in learning and schooling" Lessons from  
<sup>1</sup>Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) for the Family-School and Community Partnerships Bureau;  
<sup>1</sup>2012.

them to enter further education, and careers, without the necessity for mainstream schooling, and many students also make the transition to mainstream schooling from home education, without difficulty.

In my research for this Inquiry, I have read the legislation and policies pertaining to home education registration in every other Australian state, and in New Zealand, and have asked home educators in other states about their experience. As a result of my research, I have no doubt that there is no other Australian state in which home educators are so poorly treated as in NSW, asked to provide such extensive paperwork, or provided with so little support. Parents wanting to home educate are required to have an extensive programme, linked to the BoSTES syllabuses, maintain detailed records of their children's learning, have home visits, and yet are given no help, are not given information about any support they could access, and are actually excluded from assistance that is provided to every other school-aged student in NSW.

In contrast, the following paragraphs show how home education is better supported and the registration process less onerous in other jurisdictions.

In South Australia, the registration process is actually an exemption from school attendance, and part-time schooling/part-time home education is available, as is access to distance education materials, for all home educators. Travellers can be registered for home education, and the wide variety of approaches to home education are understood, and accepted.

In Western Australia, home educated students are provided with access to the same school swimming lessons as other students, and information about events and support relevant to home educators is provided to them by the registering body through regular newsletters.

In Victoria, distance education materials, registration for travelling families and part-time school attendance are also available, and there is no onerous documentation requirement.

In the ACT, the diversity of home educational approaches of home educators is recognised, and a provisional registration period allows families who are new to home education, to have a legal status, in order to commence home education, without having to produce documentation straight away. Once this provisional period is over, home

educators are much better able to provide registering officials with a realistic plan of how they will provide their children with a high quality education.

In the Northern Territory, there is also a provisional registration that is granted, while families get started in home education, before the visit of a registering official.

In Queensland, a formerly highly restrictive regulatory system was reviewed in 2003, and the outcome was a much better system. Now, a provisional registration period occurs, and a supportive body oversees home education registration, which recognises the variety of styles of home education.

In Tasmania, those who support home educators in the registration process have extensive experience in home education, so that they are well-placed to support those registering, providing helpful information, and helping them meet the requirements of registration. There is also a government-provided resource library, to help equip home educators, by providing materials to assist them. This state enjoys the highest engagement with the home education registration process of any state in Australia.

In New Zealand, home education registration is continuous, so that once registered, no new registration is required, simply a statutory declaration every six months, to state that home education is continuing. Home educators are provided with financial assistance, in the form of a “home education supervision allowance”.

Home education in NSW is ‘enshrined in the law’, to quote the Authorised Person, at my first registration interview. The process to get registered back then (2000) wasn’t difficult, but it was stressful, having someone come to check out my home and my plan, and approve me to educate my children myself, and added nothing to my children’s education. I had cared for them for their whole lives, and provided the very best for them in every way. I had taught other people’s children at school, and tutored other children, for whom school wasn’t providing enough specialised tuition in maths and English, but I had to have someone come to my home to approve me to teach the children I cared most about, and to whom I had taught everything for 6 years, already. I was just thankful I had found our local home education network, and gained the confidence to get going. The other thing that Authorised Person said to me, with a laugh, was, ‘Some parents think I’m going to provide them with resources to help them home educate.’

Why wouldn't the government provide information and helpful resources to conscientious parents who are so committed to their children's best interests that they retain the responsibility for their education? The Education Act 1990 states, "the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child's parents". If this is so, then parents ought to be supported to do the job of educating their children, which is primarily their responsibility.

Caring for their children is considered to be the responsibility of the parents. When I brought my newborn children home, the community midwife was extremely helpful, in providing information, and linking me with other new parents. It was considered that I should care for the children, provide for their needs, nurture them, feed, clothe, and teach them the basics. I was provided with information and support to ensure I could do this job well. Taking a similar approach for new home educating parents would make a great deal of sense, linking them with other home educating families, and providing them with information, and helping them with resources.

Particularly I feel for the new home educators for whom home education is a last resort. These parents have children who have been in the mainstream school system, and they realise that it is not working for them; they are not learning, they are feeling extremely stressed or anxious, or other reasons. When the parent realises that home education will possibly be the answer, they often don't want to, or their child doesn't have the capacity to wait the time it takes to create a syllabus-linked document of the programme they plan to teach, to gather resources, send in the application form and have a visit from the Authorised Person, and then wait a month or so for the Certificate of Registration to arrive. School does not work for all children - parents who are keen to provide the best for their children's education ought to be provided with the support and respect they deserve. There ought to be provision for parents to start home education as soon as practicable, with a provisional registration period.

When I learned that the New Zealand government provides a 'homeschooling supervision allowance', to the home educating parents there, I was sure that they must require reams of paperwork for that, but actually that is not the case. In NZ the process involves one registration assessment, once, no Authorised Person visits to the home, and a statutory declaration is then sent in every 6 months to indicate that home education is continuing - our NSW government requires far more paperwork, we must

have regular visits in our homes, and we are provided with no support, financial or otherwise, and indeed we are excluded from many things that are provided for school children - school swimming lessons, laptops, access to TVET courses, and more. These sorts of things can be accessed by those in Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia and even Western Australia.

The Tasmanian system of home education registration has long held my imagination - a system which is administered by those who are experienced in home education, directly under the auspices of the Minister for Education. How wonderful! In contrast, NSW new home educating families must find support for themselves. As an experienced home educator, I voluntarily devote hours of my time, at no cost, to help new home educating parents, and they are so grateful to have found me and our network. Formally linking new home educating parents with those with experience, through the registration process itself would be valuable in supporting those who are just starting in home education.

The NSW home education registration process is by far the least supportive in Australia and New Zealand, and requires a much greater volume of paperwork, than any other jurisdiction. Considering the importance of parents' role and responsibility, it makes sense to provide home educating parents with a supportive, practical system that is not onerous or burdensome, but which helps them to provide their children with a high quality education, supplying academic, social and personal benefits.

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

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

Home education allows parents to provide learning opportunities at the right level for their children, to access their particular needs, and to tailor-make an education for each individual. Home educating children are able to access further education opportunities, without difficulty, and often achieve educational goals, such as TAFE and University qualifications, at a younger age than their mainstream counterparts. In my experience, home educated students develop a mature and confident outlook, and are courteous and considerate in the way they treat others. In addition, students who have special

needs, are able to be well-catered for, and often achieve far beyond early expectations for them.

We chose to home educate our children, when the eldest two were 5 and 3, after looking at all available options for education in our local area. Local public schools were very large, and I knew of bullying issues and other difficulties that were being experienced by the children there, through my work as a maths and English tutor to some of the students. A small parent controlled Christian school which was perhaps a closer fit philosophically, was half an hour drive away, and would have required a significant financial commitment. While pondering these options, I became aware of a local home educating community, and my children and I began attending some of the activities they organised, and evening parent meetings, with those who had already chosen this form of education. I was particularly impressed through meeting the children in our local area who were home educated. In my experience as a teacher in a private school on Sydney's North Shore, as a tutor of local children, and as a leader on children's camps, I had never before met children who were so articulate and confident, able to initiate and carry on a conversation with adults, exchanging ideas and answering my questions in full sentences, even year 5 and 6 boys! I was sure that this was the way I wanted my children to grow and learn. I wanted my son and my daughter, to be engaged in learning, confident and articulate, and able to participate in meaningful conversation with adults and children of all ages.

The 15 years since then have not diminished my enthusiasm for home education, and my confidence in its merits in producing highly educated, self-confident individuals. Our local home education network, comprised of diverse families has grown enormously since those days, and now has a variety of activities running every day of the week. In addition to regular activities, a large number of excursions and special one-off activities are organised every term. The home educated children I know are actively involved in the community in many ways, participating in sporting activities, serving the community as volunteers, leading in scouting, church and other groups. Those who have moved past home education, have all done well, moving successfully into further education and employment, and taking their place as well-rounded, contributing citizens.

I have particularly been impressed that many of these children have a real relationship with me, and other children and parents in the community, which continues as they grow into adulthood, including people of a variety of ages in their friendship group. I am very impressed by the high quality of education home education allows, and have a number of young friends who were home educated for all, or the vast majority of their lives, and are now working or studying in many fields, including an accomplished 18 year old cellist in her second year of studying Music at the Conservatorium in \_\_\_\_\_, a 16 year old studying Social Work at \_\_\_\_\_, a 19 year old working



for Google, after having topped his degree course in Advanced Science at last year, and an 18 year old studying a double degree in Psychology and Education at Uni and teaching drama in her spare time. All of these students used pathways other than school to enter further education, and are doing very well.

Our eldest child, our son, now aged 20, transitioned into further education through the TAFE system. Aged 15, he was able to enrol in a Certificate III in IT (Software Applications), from which he went into a Certificate IV in IT (Web Design), followed by a Diploma in IT (Web Development). These qualifications took him 18 months to complete, all together, and then he applied to a Bachelor of Information Technology. He was not only accepted, he was given 90 units credit (over a year), and also won a Science Faculty Scholarship. He completed his degree when his age peers were finishing their HSC, and since then has been employed in a school, in the ICT support team. He leads in our church youth group, week by week, teaching a group of year 8 boys, and is very much valued by the parents of those he teaches. He is a dedicated, and responsible young man.

Not only are they accomplished, but home educated students are able to communicate and have real relationships with people across a wide age range, in a way that many young people do not. Indeed, it was this that first drew me to home education in the beginning, when I could see that home educated children were really capable of interacting with adults in a way that is unusual in our society.

In my own childhood experience, the adult world was very separate from my school life, and children were segregated into narrow age brackets, so most of my daily interaction was with age peers, at the same level as me, and when it came to thinking about leaving school, it was very difficult to imagine a life outside that world. In contrast, I am very pleased that my own family has a very different experience, my younger children interact throughout the week with older children who are moving into further study and careers, and, consequently, my younger children are also very aware of the pathways that the home educated older children are taking, and are beginning to think about their own pathways for the future. As well as developing real relationships with many adults and older children, my children have always had the opportunity of interacting with children younger than themselves, not only their siblings, but young children in other families.

My eldest daughter, now 18, is particularly able to care for young children, and can comfort them, care for them, teach them, and takes a high degree of care for their safety. She is very highly regarded as a young woman of excellent character, and often cares for younger children, in order to provide a break for parents. She has volunteered in the children's programme at church for many years, teaching children of all ages,

from babies to teenagers. Last year she completed a Certificate IV at TAFE in Laboratory Techniques, gaining an overall distinction. She was very highly regarded by the teachers in the class, and this year she has started studying at University, in a Bachelor of Arts with a Bachelor of Science degree.

As well as educational activities provided by our family, and others organised within the home educating network, my children, as homeschoolers, can access reading, maths and computer programming instruction online, go to an artist's studio for drawing classes, attend writing classes pitched at their level (not at their age group), visit museums, art galleries, historic homes, Houses of Parliament, attend performances at the Opera House several times per year, to watch Shakespeare, concerts and other productions, and many more places. Our daily conversation can incorporate all the things we are learning. As soon as a child wants to know something we can provide them with answers, or help them in finding out answers. They are able to access real learning in a seemingly infinite number of ways. Home education is the ultimate individualised learning programme.

My children are all very creative, and this has been fostered by the home education environment. As an aid to strengthening my young son's hands, and because he was a reluctant writer, I encouraged him to do needlework. While I read to them, which I did for several hours every day, I allowed the children to draw or do needlework. My son completed a half-cross stitch tapestry when he was 12, and followed it with a quilt for his youngest sister, designed by him, and completed as a family project, with every one of us; dad, mum, and sisters aged 10, 5 and 3, all completing part of it. Techniques involved applique and embroidery, sewing on the machine (done by the older two children and me), and quilting. It would have been impossible for such a project to have been undertaken, had the children been at school, and for a 13 year old boy, I imagine the peer pressure which exists in the mainstream school environment would have really crushed my son's desire to do needlework. Instead, we completed a project which encouraged his design abilities, strengthened his hands, developed stronger bonds between the family, and taught every one of us new skills, demonstrating in a practical way that learning is a lifelong activity. While my son wasn't keen on painting, he also used many other mediums for creativity. My eldest daughter is also very creative, She has studied drawing for many years, and has designed and made her own clothes, curtains, quilts, and other projects. When she was 15, and all the girls were to be members of the bridal party at my younger brother's wedding, my daughter decided to sew the flowergirl dress to be worn by her youngest sister. The techniques involved were quite skilled, and she was able to study dressmaking under a home educating mother who had taught tailoring, ending up with a result which was equal to the identical dresses worn by the other flower girls, which had been professionally made. The younger girls love drawing, and have enjoyed having their works hung in local art

exhibitions. They are able to spend a lot of time, creating and designing, in a range of ways.

Our five children are now aged 20, 18, 13, 11 and 7 years, and have been home educated throughout their primary and secondary education. I chose to home educate as I enjoyed being with my children, and considered that home education would give them the best possible outcome. They could follow their interests, be continually challenged to learn at an appropriate level, and retain a robust self-esteem. We joined our local home education network, which offers many opportunities for learning and relationship building. We have several activities each week with others from this group, and my children have built relationships with a diverse group of people across the age spectrum. In spite of pursuing a fairly natural style of learning, amidst the wide variety of activities and excursions of which we availed ourselves, and not requiring my children to take tests, they have been able to participate very well in more formal studies in the years following home education, including handing assignments in on time, and gaining good results in exams. My eldest child now has 3 TAFE qualifications - Certificate III in IT (Software Applications), Certificate IV in IT(Web Design) and Diploma in IT (Web Development), and a degree Bachelor of IT. He graduated from Uni at the age 18, and has been working full time for the last 18 months. From the age of 15, my now 18 year old daughter completed a number of short TAFE courses, in Costume design, Barista skills, and First Aid, as part of her studies, and gained a distinction in a Certificate IV in Laboratory Techniques last year, which enabled her to be offered a place in a double degree course at University this year. My children enjoy learning, are creative and have strong friendships, and good family relationships. Home education works well in families who choose it.

It is my hope that this inquiry will help show the kinds of results home educated students are achieving, the excellent outcomes, not only academically, but in many other ways, and the need for a supportive system of registration for home education to replace the current one.

(ii) financial costs,

I have been fortunate that I have had the support of my husband, who has earned to provide for our needs, and the needs of our children, while I have been able to concentrate full-time on caring for our children and facilitating their education. My husband is a draftsman, and has been able to provide enough to cover plenty of excursions and classes, to enable our children to have a richly interesting education. I

have friends who home educate who are single mothers, who must think carefully about whether they will have funds for this excursion, or that lesson, but nevertheless, spend everything possible on ensuring their children's home education is of the highest quality. It is a sacrifice to do this, but it is well worth the investment. We save the government thousands of dollars by not placing our children in the school system. In order to better support home educating families, and to ensure that children can really be provided with the best opportunities, greater funding would really make a difference. It would help to be able to access resources, funding could provide for group activities to hire rooms, and financial support for home educating families would really help many to provide resources, classes and materials for the high quality education of their children.

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

I home educate, because as a teacher I saw the mainstream school system fail from the point of view of teachers, parents and students. I once gave a poor report to a bright but unmotivated young girl. Her mother, who was paying good money for her private school education asked me how I would help her daughter reach her full potential. I thought to myself, "What can I do for that girl? Can the mother not see that I teach 150 children during the week - I have no time for special attention to one of them!" When blessed with my own children, I better understood that mother's perspective - of course the 149 other children were of no concern to her - I only taught one of her children. I understood then that no other teacher would have the capacity to provide an individualised education for my child like I would, and I could not delegate to another the responsibility I had to provide the very highest quality education for my children. I could only fulfill this responsibility to my own satisfaction by home educating them. Many people say to me that home education must be easy as I am a teacher. I do have a degree, and a Diploma of Education, but home education bears little resemblance to classroom education - I do not have to control the behaviour of a large group of students, I have the flexibility to teach to my child's special interests, and my relationship with my children fuels my desire to learn alongside them. When I find my knowledge in a particular area lacking, such as occurred the year my son chose to learn about French History, I become a learner along with my children, and we discover the subject together, like fellow travellers in a foreign country.

My husband is a skilled designer, and a qualified tradesman. His skills are particularly helpful when the children need maths help, and they have used wood-working tools under his supervision - to make a CD rack, and a tray, to build a small boat, to install french doors, and to build a chicken coop. He has a unique contribution to the education of our children.

The families I know who home educate range from those who are not well off, and those who have not themselves had a high level of formal education, to those who have high levels of education and significant resources. All of them have nevertheless sacrificed their time and money. They all have provided their children with an excellent education, because they have given high priority to investing in the lives of their own children.

(iv) extent of and reasons for unregistered home schoolers,

Although I know many who are registered, I know many home educators avoid the process, if they are in a position to do that. I have a very good understanding of the lack of enthusiasm for home educators for the registration process. It adds nothing to the content of our children's education, takes our time away from our children, and is too much work. I help many go through the process of registration - so many cannot comprehend what is being asked of them, not because they are incapable of facilitating their children's education, but because the edu-speak of the registration document is a foreign language to them. I help them make a document they will never use, to appease the authorities, and get their "boxes ticked", so they can get on with the practicalities of ensuring their children learn. I understand my normally law-abiding friends, who avoid the process - what would they gain from participating in this "box-ticking" exercise? Nothing at all.

I know other families who have had very bad experiences registering for home education. Since having these experiences, in which they were unfairly treated, or treated in an unprofessional manner by Authorised Persons, they have avoided registration. These parents educate their children with care, and I know of children from these families who have successfully gone on to further education and work.

I also know families for whom BoSTES has inserted themselves into family law issues, and not acted in the best interests of the child. Although the Department of Education has a policy regarding parental disagreement about education,

“Sometimes parents cannot agree about the school at which their child is to be first enrolled. The Department’s primary focus is to ensure that all children of compulsory school age are either enrolled in and attending school or are registered for and receiving home schooling. In circumstances where parents are in disagreement, the child is to be enrolled in the school chosen by the parent with whom the child is then living.”<sup>2</sup>

In these cases, the child is enrolled in accordance with the custodial parent’s wishes, the BoSTES insists on parental agreement, or it will not register children for home education. This policy has resulted in children and parents experiencing extreme difficulty, particularly when home education is chosen on medical grounds. As some non-custodial parents use this to continue acting abusively towards their children’s other parent, this implicates BoSTES in allowing a continuation of abuse, by acting outside their authority, in matters of family law.

In cases of parental disagreement on educational issues, in spite of the existence of court orders for shared parental responsibility in educational matters, the children should be able to be registered for home education according to the choice of the parent with whom the children live.

If the registration process supported, and provided some benefit for home educators, and if the registering officials treated home educators professionally, and acted in the best interests of the child at all times, I am sure there would be far fewer unregistered home educators.

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

My children are sensitive, of average intelligence and have no particularly special needs. My son has epilepsy, but it has not been a particular disability. Had he been at school, he may have had some teasing, but then the most ordinary of students suffers teasing. My daughters were late readers, but they were never labelled because of it, and all learnt to read well, except for the youngest, who is in the process of learning. In a home education context it doesn’t matter how old you are when confident in reading,

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<sup>2</sup> Section 8.2, DEALING WITH FAMILY LAW RELATED ISSUES IN SCHOOLS AND TAFE NSW: GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL AND INSTITUTE STAFF, NSW Department of Education and Training, 2007.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/gotoschool/familylaw/familylawguide.pdf>

as long as you progress at your own pace, without being looked down on for learning to read more slowly. There is no impediment to learning, as we have many other ways to gain knowledge than by reading. My pre-reading children can sing the countries of the world, or the states of the US, can watch Shakespeare plays and learn to understand them in the way they were meant to be studied, can observe the tides and the birds, can draw and sew and cook, and can hear books read aloud to them, by a parent or sibling who sits with them and holds them close.

I do feel for the concerned parents of special needs children, who cannot get the special attention they need in school, who remove their anxious, depressed, or bullied, educationally disadvantaged child from school to home educate them; they need to create a plan, in edu-speak to gain permission to do what the system has failed to do. Occasionally they are not able to negotiate the jargon, and gain registration - and yet their children learn nothing in the system. It would be good for them to have a provisional period to get on their feet with home education, and care for their child, before the document of their plan needed to be produced.

There are many home educating families who have children with particular needs that cannot be catered for in the mainstream school system. These families, along with all who chose to home educate, should be supported sensitively and provided with access to resources, and specialist equipment, as are children in the mainstream system.

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

I trained as a high school teacher, and taught Social Sciences at a private school on Sydney's North Shore. Although I loved the subjects I taught, I was dismayed at the difficulty there was in teaching. Instead of spending the bulk of time controlling students' behaviour and dealing with the vast differences between students in many areas, I wanted to just excite children to learn about the world in which they lived. Unfortunately my best intentions failed. It was too hard to teach in a truly interesting inspiring way, in the environment of institutional schooling.

NSW homeschooling registration policy so fails to understand home education that the BoSTES defines homeschooling as "education delivered in a child's home by a parent or guardian". We retain responsibility for our children's education, but it is neither entirely delivered in our home, nor solely by parents. For our children, we source maths

lecturers (via the internet) from around the world; local artists to provide specialised guidance in drawing; specialist gymnastics, swimming and tennis coaches; and others passionate about particular topics (eg. Shakespeare, creative writing, science) to facilitate our children's education. We visit parks, museums, libraries, the beach, the Opera House, Canberra, the mountains and Dubbo, Houses of Parliament and other people's homes, so that our children can learn in the best way possible. The "world is our classroom", and our children can learn that which interests them, in the most interesting locations, delivered by experts. This is so different from the replication of real world experiences that must occur for children to learn 'en masse' in a classroom. Our children don't need to have a money problem written in a book for them - they can learn while buying goods themselves, under our guidance, from a young age. They can converse and interact with people of all ages in the community, not solely with a group of age peers. They do not need to be reprimanded by the teacher, and told 'school is not for socialising'.

Home education is quite different in form from school education

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

I have been registered with the Board of Studies (now BoSTES) for many years. At no time have the registration policies provided any help in my home education, but they were generally easy enough to achieve, in the past. The policies have recently become extremely onerous, and Authorised Persons, not having experience in home education, and also due to BoSTES policy, provide no support, and actually hamper parents' ability to provide a rich learning environment by demanding adherence to paperwork to an order that is not required in schools. Over the years, home educators have helped me, and I have helped others, learn how best to help our children learn. Since the changes have come in, I and other experienced home educators have spent many hours helping other families produce the paperwork that will fulfill the requirements of the BoSTES. This has become necessary, as the requirements are onerous, and rather than reflecting a desire to have children well educated, and supported in their learning, require a kind of rigorous adherence to an education which is more styled on the school system. Thus it has become a challenge to help families, particularly those removing children from school, "tick the boxes", before we can really help them with the practicalities of home education.



It would be infinitely sensible to have home educators support home educators in the registration process. They already provide one another with support, but in an ad hoc way. Why focus on producing a document that will not actually help home educate, when experienced home educators could help new ones link with networks of other home educators, find resources, learn how to find a better way of teaching maths that might mean more to one child, or locate an artist to teach the artistic child, or link into the excursions run by other home educators? The voluntary support that home educators provide to one another could be supported formally, so that it is more easily accessed by those just starting out with home education. Once home educators are established, the registration process could be a simple matter of advising that home education is continuing. New home educators welcome the support of other experienced home educators. Many would be happy to register if support were intrinsic to the process. Respect for home education, equal to that given to institutional forms of education, and a minimisation of paperwork, and provision of support would enable home educators to see benefit in the registration process.

I believe that provision of funding for home educating parents would be sensible, allowing parents greater resources to provide the very best education for their children.

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

Our local Authorised Person is a retired school principal, and very encouraging of our local home educating network and its activities. As nice as he is, he does not understand how home education works, having never experienced it for himself. He has said to me, "I can see you are providing a high quality of education, but how can I tick my boxes?". He should be able to tick the box, when he sees that we do provide a high quality of education.

He has recently begun giving my phone number to new home educators before he visits them, at my request. That way I can help them know they will have everything required to "tick his boxes", and the confidence to face the visit, through having support. He says my support of the new home educators makes his job easier - the policies prevent him providing help.

One family, who came to me after the Authorised Person failed them at their first visit, said they failed due to 'not having a timetable'. Their child was 6 years old. Why did they need a timetable? A six year old is learning every waking minute, as he explores his world. He does not need timetabling.

I am aware of other families, in which the Authorised Person has caused great distress through unprofessional and insensitive behaviour. In one example, a BoSTES member of staff insisted on seeing a greater level of work from a child, and threatened refusing re-registration for home education, and a return to school, even though the parent had indicated that their child was suffering from depression. This added greatly to the distress of both parent and student. It was also against the *Education Act 1990*, which states,

“Section 74 (2) The Minister may not cancel the registration of a child for home schooling under subsection (1) (a) if: (a) the child was prevented from receiving instruction by sickness, permanent or temporary incapacity or some accident or unforeseen event,”

Thus, threatening with cancellation of registration a home educated student suffering from the medical condition, depression, which prevented them from receiving instruction, shows a disregard for the legislation.

Occasionally, in the past, home educators from the Home Education Association have been invited by the Board to participate in the training of Authorised Persons, by speaking to groups of them, but that has ceased, and has not occurred for a number of years. We have been told that Authorised Persons learn on the job, at the registration of home educators. This is entirely inadequate training. I know of Authorised Persons who have been completely unaware of the possible pathways for further education for home educated students. These pathways are many, and assistance for home educators in finding these out should be available from the registering authority.

Authorised Persons should have experience in home educating for many years themselves, in order to be able to register others for home education, with appropriate understanding and sensitivity. The policies should require them to provide support, so that home educating parents are better enabled to do the very best job of providing a high quality of education for their children.

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

The BoSTES has claimed in letters to home educators, that the recent changes to the *Registration for Home Schooling in NSW – Information Package* were largely about the updated NSW Syllabus, and the necessity for home educators to adhere to these Syllabuses. They have attempted to explain away home educators' distress at the recent changes to policy, as an unwillingness to adhere to the NSW Syllabus. This has ignored the detailed explanations of many home educators, as to why the policy changes are inappropriate. The registration policies have changed significantly, to become inflexible, inappropriate, and a burdensome barrier to many home educating families, and undermine the best aspects of home education.<sup>3</sup>

To adhere to the NSW syllabus is not hard. However, I would feel remiss if I only provided my children with the content of the NSW syllabus - it is too brief. I want my children to relish the language of Shakespeare from a young age, not only from high school. I want them to experience classic literature, modern classics, and more. I want them to create artworks to the best of their ability, to go on many excursions, to know the great artists, to appreciate many cultures, to be skilled in cookery, highly accomplished in many areas design and technology, and in many other areas. I am concerned that my children, from a young age have an appreciation of the history of not only Australia, but of cultures and countries around the world.

As an example, in looking at the NSW Stage 5 History syllabus - the main stage in which World War 2 history is studied, I was appalled to discover that the major emphasis was on that War's effect on our own country. World War 2 did have significant impact on our country, but much greater impact in other countries, particularly in European countries, and in the rest of the Pacific region. It would be well for children to learn much more about World War 2 than the current syllabus appears to provide time for, and I am determined that my children will learn about World Wars 1 and 2, and other significant events in world history, throughout their primary and secondary education. Recently, I looked in the Stage 5 history section for content relating to Japan

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<sup>3</sup> [Changes that have been made to the Home Schooling in NSW Information Package](#)

in World War 2. There was nothing. This is the only time that World War 2 is studied in detail, and there is nothing relating to Japan's involvement or experience.

The NSW syllabus is concerned about providing a broad education to the diverse children who rely on it. Showing detailed adherence to the NSW Syllabus requires unnecessary levels of paperwork on the part of home educating parents, particularly as home educated students, having a rich learning environment, go beyond the basics of the NSW syllabus, without any difficulty. The ability of parents to document adherence to the Syllabuses is an onerous requirement, as the educational jargon used in the syllabus documents is not easily understood by parents, indeed the Department of education recommended that extra training was provided for teachers when this requirement for schools came in, to ensure that trained teachers could understand the jargon<sup>4</sup>.

In spite of parents' difficulty in documenting adherence to the Syllabuses, their ability to provide a level of instruction that exceeds the requirement of the Syllabuses is not difficult at all. The requirement to document adherence to the NSW Syllabuses is unnecessarily onerous. The requirement prior to 2013 was for home educating families to provide 'courses of study in the six Key Learning Areas', which was easy to understand, and easy to document. The requirements for home educators in other Australian states only require them to provide 'courses of study in the six Key Learning Areas', and it would be well if this requirement was reinstated - not because home educators want to provide less than the NSW Syllabus allows for, but because we provide so much more.

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

Home education provides a safe environment for children. In my experience of the home educating community, the children generally spend lots of time in the community, at classes, at the library, with other families. The recent BoSTES Information Package for Home Schooling describes home education as "education delivered in a child's home by a parent or guardian", which not only shows a lack of understanding of how

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<sup>4</sup> Eltis, K, Crump S. Time to teach, time to learn. 1st ed. NSW Department of Education and Training; 2003.

home education works, but actually limits the opportunities of home educated children. It also contributes to the myths that home educated children are isolated, and lack social opportunities.

It is important for home educated children to be encouraged as far as possible (although occasionally this could be difficult for some families) to link up with a home educating community nearby, and to participate in activities available in the wider community. In relation to legislation and policy, the words 'home schooling' should be replaced with the words 'home education', and the definition of home education should reflect the diverse learning that families provide, in the 'real world'.

I am aware that the Ombudsman<sup>5</sup> and others have cast suspicion on home educators, due to cases in which children have been not sent to school, and have been abused. In at least one of these cases, DoCS, although visiting the home, and aware that the parents claimed to be home schooling their child, failed to check whether or not a registration process had in fact occurred. As a result of this failure in their duty of care, the Ombudsman has worked with BoSTES to create more onerous policies for parents who do register for home education, which makes no sense at all. In addition, the name Home School Liaison officers (the officers formerly known as truant officers) provides an unfortunate link. I am appalled that conscientious home educating parents would come under suspicion. The onerous and unsupportive nature of the current registration policies decrease the likelihood of engagement of normally law-abiding people, and so make it harder to distinguish genuine home educators who avoid the registration process from those who actually do neglect the education of their children.

It is essential for the home education registration process to be both robust and supportive; a robust system to prevent abusive or neglectful parents from registering for home education, and thus discrediting conscientious parents, and a supportive system, providing benefits, a sensitive approach and appropriate policies, in order to encourage genuine home educators to engage with the registration process.

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

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0012/3360/Special-Report-Death-of-Ebony-Oct-2009.pdf](http://www.ombo.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/3360/Special-Report-Death-of-Ebony-Oct-2009.pdf)

Appropriate regulation for home education would have policies which were developed in consultation with home educators. Those best placed to provide support and registration for home educators would be home educators with extensive experience themselves in home education. The system currently in place in Tasmania has worked well, with the respect and engagement of home educators, for over 20 years. I hope that a similar system will be set up in NSW, providing support for new home educators.

I know people who are currently travelling around Australia. Although they were previously registered as home educators in NSW, when they chose, to do the 'trip of a lifetime' around our country, they were forced to give up their registration, and become unregistered, as registration in NSW is tied to the home in which you live. This is absolutely ridiculous. The photos they send back to us are an education in themselves. Their children are being educated, much more thoroughly in Australian history and geography, and in other areas, than would be the case were they still in their house, and yet this is unrecognised by the BoSTES.

I have personally supported women whose estranged partners opposed home education, in spite of the children having a history of home education, with the expressed intention of hurting the mother of their children. These women have lived in distress, fighting to have the right to home educate their children, and the children also have experienced fear and uncertainty.

If court orders exist which require agreement on a school by both parents, both signatures are required on the enrolment form, however, schools will enrol children, even without the other parent's indicated agreement, according to the choice of the parent with whom the child lives. In contrast, BoSTES will not register children for home education in these cases. I know of one case in particular, where, in spite of an a father with a history of domestic violence providing a letter agreeing to home education, when the registration of the teenaged children was due for renewal, BoSTES phoned the father, in order to determine his continued agreement, and rejected the renewal application on the grounds of a verbal retraction of consent. This caused great distress for the custodial parent and for her children, who had been provided with specialist medical reports, stating that mainstream school was an unsuitable environment for them.

In addition, Courts of law will rarely consider home education as suitable, and do not consider it to be “in the best interests of the child”, often in spite of the children’s history of home education. This is due to home education not enjoying equal validity with institutional schooling, allowing domestic abuse to continue. Registration for home education should be available, in spite of the resistance of a non-custodial parent, if it is in the best interests of the child.

The Department of Education guidelines for dealing with family law and those guidelines state:

“There is no requirement however for school staff to independently establish that any decision to enrol in a particular school has been made jointly by the parents. Sometimes parents cannot agree about the school at which their child is to be first enrolled. The Department’s primary focus is to ensure that all children of compulsory school age are either enrolled in and attending school or are registered for and receiving home schooling. In circumstances where parents are in disagreement, the child is to be enrolled in the school chosen by the parent with whom the child is then living.”<sup>6</sup>

BoSTES should ensure that their interactions with home educating families are conducted in such a way as to ensure “the best interests of the child” are considered to be of the highest priority.

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

Many home educators, particularly those whose children have special needs, are prevented from accessing special resources, such as the vision impaired child I know, who was not able to access the special help she needed one-on-one in the school, for enough time, and yet when home educated, with plenty of individual attention, was unable to access the specialist equipment, or attend the Vision Impaired Camp she enjoyed.

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<sup>6</sup> Section 8.2, DEALING WITH FAMILY LAW RELATED ISSUES IN SCHOOLS AND TAFE NSW: GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOL AND INSTITUTE STAFF, NSW Department of Education and Training, 2007.

<sup>6</sup><http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/gotoschool/familylaw/familylawguide.pdf>

Hospital schools, which are available to children hospitalised for significant periods with serious health issues, and their siblings whose schooling might be affected, are not available to home educated children. This is heartless - affecting as it does very vulnerable families. This policy should be overturned immediately.

The Submission to the Home Schooling Inquiry made by the Home Education Association thoroughly addresses the issues of support needs for many home educating families.

Some parents would value the opportunity of accessing school based resources, part-time schooling, TVET courses, and/or distance education materials. These should be made available for home educators, as they are in other states, such as South Australia, ACT and Victoria.

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

There are 23 members on the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards. These include teachers, principals, and parent representatives from both government and non-government educational institutions, nominees of the Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools, an expert in early childhood education, an Aboriginal person and various others. There is however, no member representing home educators on the Board, even though BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW, and that home educating families are greatly affected by the policies of BoSTES. In spite of the fact that home education is quite different in its nature from institutional education, and would require specialist input if decisions made by the Board were going to be appropriate for home educators, and in spite of the Home Education Association asking for representation, we have been told that BoSTES is not going to have a home educator appointed.

Since the effect of the recent policies has become obvious to home educators, the BoSTES has been asked many times to make more appropriate decisions and to overturn the new, inappropriate policies, but it has claimed that there are no changes in policy, in spite of the fact that we have experienced these changes first-hand. The changes are tracked in the document attached below. The Minister and the BoSTES have shown disregard for the concerns of home educators, by continually denying the



significance of the policy changes, indeed denying that things have changed. Consequently, I am of the opinion that BoSTES should be replaced by an entirely separate body, answerable directly to the Minister for Education. The Minister for Education, when extensively advised by home educators, will be able to gain a better appreciation for home education as a valid alternative to institutional education.

(f) any other related matter.

The other matter I would like to highlight is the value of the local home educating network. I am a contact for our local group, which is made up of hundred of families, all very different, but bound together by our educational choice. We organise excellent excursions, and other activities, and provide significant support for both new families, and experienced home educators, without any funding, except for that of parents. Sometimes, we are able to hire rooms for group activities, but often it is difficult to hire appropriate venues, as even the costs of community centre rooms are prohibitive.

Provision of government-funded home education resource centres, in locations near home education networks, would be an excellent way in which home educators could be resourced, and have better facilities for running group activities. Libraries for specialist educational resources, and home education books, could be set up within these centres, which would provide support for home educators.

## **Conclusions**

I am convinced that the NSW home education registration system is in need of significant change, with thorough consultation with home educators. I am hopeful that we will soon have a system which is the very best in Australia, supportive of the parents who choose this path, for the great benefit of their families.

## **Recommendations for better practice in NSW, based on aspects of other states policies.**

An independent dedicated body overseeing home education, to replace BoSTES, and report directly to the Minister for Education, in which experienced home educators are employed to assist families applying for home education registration, would be more appropriate and would provide help and assistance. Those experienced in home education would undertake any Authorised Person visits, and support would be intrinsic

to the process. Policy development would be therefore undertaken with home educators always involved in the process. The success of such a body has worked in Tasmania for over 20 years, since the inception of the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council (THEAC), encouraging a high level of engagement with registration policies by home educators.

Provisional registration periods, from the time a child is removed from school, until the time final registration is given, would allow parents to remove children quickly from unsuitable school environment, and provide the opportunity of becoming comfortable with the practice of home education, before having to submit documentation regarding the home education programme. Provisional registration granted on receipt of the application for home education, would give children a legal status while parents gain a clearer understanding of the unique nature of home education; how home education works, how to go about it, what can be accessed by way of support, and how best to document learning in a way that is meaningful for home educating parents. In the Australian Capital Territory, six months provisional registration is provided, and I consider that this would be the minimum appropriate length of provisional registration.

Set time periods for registration, as in other states, time periods for registration could be independent of any visits by APs. For example, in the ACT, provisional registration of six months is given on initial application, without provision of an educational plan, then registration periods are 12 months and 2 years thereafter. Similar periods are provided in Tasmania. This gives plenty of time for parents to provide for their child's educational needs, without being concerned for the next visit closely following on from a prior visit.

Greater levels of support - families in states where the registering authority is helpful appreciate this. In Tasmania, and to some extent Queensland, there is assistance provided for families just getting started in home education. Western Australian home educators are provided with helpful information about activities and support available. The fact that home educators are involved in the registration process is especially valued in Tasmania, as they are particularly able to provide the most appropriate assistance.

Reduced requirements for visits as families are established as home educators. In NSW, home educators with 20 years experience, and numerous graduated and successful students are required to have the same level of scrutiny and visitation as

those just starting out. These proven home educators should be appropriately recognised for their experience and success, and not required to have home visits.

Optional visits, or phone consultation, for example, for particular support requirements.

The option for a support visit or phone call at any time, to help with particular needs could support and assist parents greatly. For example, parents often feel the need for extra support when children are in high school levels, and as they begin to think about further education, to discuss pathways to further education, and assist with finding out more in relation to a child's interests and further education. This would necessitate a high level of understanding of the pathways to further education, by the registering authority. Other optional support visits could be provided for helping if a particular learning difficulty was becoming apparent, helping the family to access special needs support.

Different educational philosophies accepted. The understanding of various forms and philosophies of home education is apparent in many other states, such as ACT, Tasmania, and Queensland. The recent changes to the NSW IP in 2013 have removed references to various forms of home education. In practice, many APs expect home educators to use more school-like educational methods. There is evidence that home educated students whose families employ every variety of home educating philosophy go on to further education and employment.

Parental responsibility for choosing educational programme - most states, other than NSW, do not require detailed adherence to the State syllabus, rather, the curriculum provides a broad framework, or choice of curriculum is at the discretion of the parents. The Key Learning Areas are a good minimum curriculum guideline for parents. At maximum, the Stage Statements should be sufficient to show that the home educator has an understanding of the NSW syllabus. Home education provides a rich learning environment, in which a high quality of education is available to students.

Financial support, provided for parents in New Zealand, in the form of the Home Education Rebate, and in Queensland, by way of the Textbook and Resource Allowance, enables parents to better resource their children's education. There would be greater incentive for home educating parents in NSW to participate in the registration process, if some form of financial assistance were made available to registered home educators. Government schools receive nearly \$16000 per student in government funding, and private schools nearly \$8500. Financial support for home educators, by

way of support of home educating networks, and/or a contribution for families towards the cost of children's education, would help networks as they provide educational activities and social interaction for children, and support for parents, would enable parents to access books, educational supplies, and classes, and would also provide an incentive to register.

Part-time schooling would be an advantage for some students to allow access to specialist resources, particularly as they grow older. This option is available in the ACT. "An overwhelming majority" of respondents to the HEA Annual Survey 2009, and in surveys conducted this year, wanted student access to part-time schooling in public schools.

Access to distance education materials - many parents would appreciate access to distance education materials. In South Australia, all home educating children are able to enrol in Open Access, the distance education college, for all or some of their subjects.

Voluntary registration for children younger or older than compulsory school age - available between the ages of 4 and 19. This would enable families to access appropriate support for the required ages, not just the compulsory school age.

Other support in various forms would be appreciated, such as linking with local home educating support networks, help with getting started in the practice of home education, provision of helpful information about activities, encouragement, access to online education options currently available to school students, access to sporting programmes, provision of student ID card, and travel concession card, etc.

Removal of the requirement for a permanent address – Authorised Person visits, if required, could be undertaken in a place other than the residence. A P.O. Box should be sufficient for communication. Registration allowed for travelling families for home education, as there is no real reason for this to be unavailable.

Equal status of home education and school education custodial parents/guardian should have the choice of registering for home education without the agreement of the non-custodial parent, where there is not joint agreement. If the non-custodial parent wished to object to home education, the matter ought to be required to be settled through the family law court process.

Documentation for home educating families should not be onerous, to allow parents the maximum time to attend to the actual education of their children. There should be an emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and encouragement of opportunities for families to link with other home educating families in practical ways - either regular local meet ups, for activities and excursions, or other links, for those isolated by geography, medical or other issues.

Thank you very much, for the opportunity to provide input, on this poorly understood, but legitimate and successful alternative form of education.

Regards

Vivienne Fox