

Submission  
No 248

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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Partially Confidential

# **Inquiry Into Home Schooling.**

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## **Addressing the Terms of Reference.**

### **Introduction.**

My name is Esther Lacoba, I have home educated since 2000 and registered my six year old daughter the following year. My husband and I have home educated our three daughters with the older two now in tertiary study. Our youngest is fourteen and still continues at home. We remained registered until 2013 and have always received the full two year registration period.

Our home education philosophy has changed a lot over the years. At first we replicated 'school at home' because knew no other way. As the years moved on we began to understand that each child had their own way of learning and experiencing life and therefore we have adapted our programme to suit their needs. Today our family sees home education as something the whole family is involved in and not separate from any other part of our lives (unlike schooled children who spend five days a week at school). We see home education as a way of life where learning takes place in every area whether it be doing actual lessons, watching a documentary, playing sports, a family outing or sitting at the computer. There is learning in every area of life and life itself is education. While giving our daughters a 'taste' of all areas of the curriculum we have been able to let them shine in areas they love and develop an appreciation in the areas they find challenging.

Our involvement with local home educating groups and community groups forms an integral part of our learning. We live in Sydney's inner west and have been involved in many home education groups over the years. I have also started groups, organised groups and encouraged others to form their own groups. We have enjoyed deep friendships through home education networks and our family has been supported through times of illness and distress.

From 2004 – 2010 I was heavily involved with the Home Education Association [www.hea.edu.au](http://www.hea.edu.au) serving on The Committee and as President for approximately five years. I assisted countless parents with questions about home education and registration when I volunteered on the HEAs 1300 number and for a time assisted and ran courses on how to home educate for the HEA. These courses ran for two full days or for four sessions.

In 2007 the HEA held an Australia wide series of conferences which saw over 1200 registrations in 7 different locations, I was the President at this time and had a major role in organising the conferences. It was an amazing experience and helped to connect home educators around Australia. The response was overwhelmingly positive.

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/schools-out-and-homes-in-says-education-rebel/2007/06/04/1180809426589.html>

I have also been part of many online support groups over the years. In my early years via yahoo and google groups and more recently via Facebook groups. These groups give a really good snapshot of current issues facing the general home educating community.

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

As a member of many online forums over the last 14 years it has been interesting to note discussions among home educators.

In the early 2000's comments on social media groups seemed to indicate a concern for home educators in QLD who were restricted in the styles of home educating and required a teacher to set or oversee all work given to the student. This was altered in mid 2004 and now many Queenslanders seem to be content with their registration process.

In 2007 Australian home educators rejoiced at the simple registration process in Victoria.

General conversation about the process in New Zealand is very positive, particularly as families from New Zealand receive tax concessions when they are home educating.

Even though the law in NSW regarding home education has not changed I have seen a huge shift in comments regarding registering in NSW. There is fear and stress when anticipating a visit from BoSTES. I hope this inquiry will put forward some helpful guidelines so that NSW home educators can choose their legal right to home educate without fear, concern, worry and distress currently overwhelming many NSW home educators.

**(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,**

From a personal perspective we have seen our oldest daughter transition to University at the age of 18 without gaining her HSC. She was home educated for the full six years of high school.

Our second daughter has transitioned to a secondary college for Stage 6 (Year 11 & 12) with

great success, her reports and parent teacher interviews are always full of praise regarding what a lovely girl she is; she is referred to as polite, sociable, a good influence and tries hard.

**(ii) financial costs,**

Our family believes that home educating has been an extremely positive experience for us and do not regret the lack of second income while staying at home with the children.

Financial assistance would have validated our decision as well as helped during difficult times. Home educators receive no recompense or tax incentives for exercising their legal right to teach their children at home and save the government many educational dollars.

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

Our family did not plan to home educate but due to various circumstances decided to home educate for one year. However, during that year we connected with other home educated families and really enjoyed the sense of community. It was easy to make the decision to continue for another year, and after that year we decided to continue indefinitely.

Our home schooling journey has been a fantastic experience and I am so glad we have chosen (fallen into) this lifestyle. I feel that homeschooling has given our family a connection that would not have been possible had our children been in the school system. Our educational philosophy changed as they entered their teenage years and we have been able to tailor their learning to be one of encouraging strengths and not dwelling on weaknesses.

We have been able to give a good 'taste' all the required subjects (as indicated by BoSTES) but not dwell on them if interest is not present at that time. I firmly believe that my bright and intelligent children can pick up any desired learning area they want if the motivation is

present. This is particularly true as they move into adulthood and work towards their chosen careers.

Home educating in the city has been a fantastic experience for us. With a large and growing home educating community around us, our children have had ready access to many activities, museums, parks and educational resources. They have not missed out on any social activities.

Early on I organised and advertised outings for other home educators on an almost weekly basis. One highlight was exploring the islands of Sydney Harbour (Goat Island, Cockatoo Island & Pinchgut etc). When I subsequently sent my oldest to school in Year 4 I was amazed at how little the local school went on excursions, two outings a term seemed 'the norm'. Our group of home educated kids had utilised so many public spaces and all during school hours!

My middle daughter helped organise a Homeschoolers Formal for teens which was a huge success and saw over 80 local teens dress up for a fun filled night of food, dancing and entertainment. Two years later the night is fondly remembered by all and I am often asked if there will be another.

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

“We inhabit a universe that is characterised by diversity” Desmond Tutu

I have met many unregistered home educators in the home educating community. The current registration system needs to be drastically changed if the government wants to see more home educators register. The system needs to be sympathetic and supportive towards home educators, not prescriptive or judgemental over individual families and their sometimes not so mainstream lifestyles.

In our 14 years of home educating we have always registered and received the maximum

allowable two years registration. However on two occasions we were unregistered for a short period of time.

I have been involved in home educating circles for many years and become close friends with many unregistered and registered home educating families. I have seen first hand the stress families go through when preparing for registration.

I could cite at least five family friends who have been refused the full two years registration. These are families I admire and look up to, they are doing the most amazing job at not only home educating their children but fostering a loving and supportive family life.

It is distressing to me that BOSTES has the ability in one visit to essentially tell a family that their lifestyle and educational plans are substandard if they do not say or do the right thing on the day an AP visits. It can be very daunting for a parent who is nervous or unable to adequately use 'educational talk' when presenting their program to the AP, a trained educational professional. Recently highly educated parents have told me how they have been refused (or given less than six months) because they could not identify the outcomes specific to a certain subject, were deemed to be 'too social' or were taking an extended family holiday (how can a holiday not be educational?). These are families I respect but have received much shorter registrations than myself. It's unfair to them when I am perhaps the 'slacker' parent but clearly presented myself better on the given day.

In 2006 when I was serving as president for the HEA the Board of Studies asked me to address the new and old APs about Home Educating and the HEA. In preparation for this talk I canvassed some on-line support groups and asked for feedback regarding home educators feel when anticipating a visit from an Authorised Person. Most of the replies stated fear and apprehension when thinking of pending visits. Many home educators felt that their choice to home educate was not just an educational choice but a parenting and family



choice. Applying for registration meant that their parenting and lifestyle were being judged, and by a person who may have had extensive educational qualifications but did not know them as individuals or even agree with their philosophy of parenting or the varying methods that families choose to home educate. The AP could, with the stroke of a pen, negate their whole sense of self and family.

I would like to see the registration process help families to feel empowered by their choices, not judged or fearful. I understand completely why some families may choose not to subject themselves to the sort of stress which can be overwhelming at registration time.

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

The educational needs of each of my children has differed from time to time and we have managed to meet those needs by utilising the resources available to us. Sometimes accessing resources has been difficult to obtain and I have felt that I have needed to fight for them.

Typical examples are organising group activities for a homeschool group often requires a long explanation about home educating and to specifically ask for for the school rate rather than the group rate.

Often we have opted to pay for various treatments for our children rather than go through the red tape involved in inquiring about free health checks, immunisations and other useful needs that would have been offered for free through the school system. This is a shame as I'm sure many families have spent long hours ensuring that their home educated children have been able to access these resources. Home Educated families should not have to fight for these things, it should be clearly documented so all home educating parents can access what schooled children don't even need to ask for.

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

My oldest daughter made several comments when transitioning to a public school for Year 4 after always being home educated.

~ It was too prescriptive, she would become engrossed in a particular educational task and the teacher would move on to the next subject, she was disappointed that she could not continue with her activity or train of thought. At home we did not stop exploring a particular theme in order to begin another 'subject', sometimes the children would be enthralled in a particular interest for days. I believe that this is how children truly satisfy their curiosity.

~ Enjoyment of school was dependant on the capability of the teacher. Her first two years were wonderful with a skilled older teacher who fostered her love of reading, writing, creativity and her rich imagination. Her third and last year was dominated by a younger male teacher who was into sports, footy tipping and mentoring the 'naughty' boys. That year found my daughter disengaged and begging to come back to home educating.

We have been able to use many community resources to enhance our childrens' learning, particularly dance, art, language, libraries, church, youth group, camps, sports, parks, theatres, museums and galleries. This is a very efficient way to cover many of the Key Learning Areas required by BOSTES in a practical way rather than do book work at home. When our children were upper/middle primary age we were able to take two long trips to parts of Australia, one to Far North Queensland & Fraser Island and the other to Kangaroo Island, Flinders Rangers & Broken Hill. Both of these trips were five weeks in duration which according to BoSTES is not allowed because the 'students' are to be educated inside NSW and during school terms only. Trips away and utilising community resources has been an integral part of our childrens education as well as a bonding experience for the whole family.

My youngest daughter is now a student at Sydney Distance Education High School in Woolloomoolloo. The difference we feel between home education and distance education is that there is very little communication with other students and families. Home educators work hard to be part of the local groups and might meet several times a week. Distance Ed has no way of fostering relationships between students and families unless it is instigated by the teachers or support staff. It is taking us longer to get to know other students at the school, we are still hopeful she will form strong friendships.

**(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:**

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

When we first began homeschooling in 2000 the home ed community was much smaller than it is now and close friendships were quickly formed, discussion amongst cohorts identified that a significant number were not registered. These unregistered families were very committed to their childrens educational needs, some were highly educated themselves, some had teaching degrees. They were actively part of home educating groups, were very acquainted with their responsibility to provide learning from the subject areas required and clearly loved their children. In 2014 many of these families have finished home educating and never registered, their children are actively involved in the community and taking control of their future.

I would like the inquiry committee to understand that the vast majority of unregistered home schoolers are genuinely concerned for the welfare of their children, they are quality families who have high standards and choose not to register for many and varied reasons. If the registration process was a very simple process then I am confident there would be a large increase of registrations.

Along with a simple registration process I believe unregistered home educators would register if they had better government support systems in place. At the moment home educators receive minimal support from the government. We receive no educational or physical support when we choose to home educate. The AP who assesses our program does not help with our program, they say 'yes' or 'no' and are not able to offer advice. Government supported advice from home educating peers would greatly relieve the stress at registration time. Long term home educators could be employed as APs, particularly those who have trained as teachers.

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

In my fourteen years plus as a home educating parent I have had two regular Authorised Persons visit our home. Both were very kind and happy with the programs I presented. In 2011 we were visited by \_\_\_\_\_, (the then head of the home schooling unit at BOS) and a colleague when registering for year 11 (stage 6). The APs were all very knowledgeable about home educating and I was able to have full and frank discussions with them. Our registrations for our last two children lapsed in early 2013 and we have not reregistered.

In 2013 the HEA asked me to be part of a delegation which would approach BOS to discuss the changes in the attitudes of some APs and met with BOS on two occasions. Many HEA members had contacted the HEA with stories of APs refusing registration or giving short registration periods while others were picked up over small issues which had not been an issue at previous AP visits.

BOS representatives at the meetings were \_\_\_\_\_.

It was clear at the meetings that the HEAs concerns would not be acted upon. While BOS

were willing to listen to the HEAs concerns they were unable to do anything to address the issues. I felt that the meetings were merely a public relations exercise on the part of the BOS as they were in no way prepared to make any real changes that would support families in their attempts to register for home schooling. The responses from from David Murphy and the Minister for Education showed that they clearly received the information from the Home Schooling Unit and were 'towing the same line', not willing to enter any meaningful discussion at all.

It is essential that APs are trained to understand the nature and different styles of home educators and be supportive of the legal choice to home educate. The recent changes to the Information Pack for Home Educators shows a real ignorance of the essence of home educating. While it doesn't explicitly say it indicates that 'school at home' is the only standard that home educators will be assessed.

Many APs don't understand the true nature of home educating or the styles that different families may use. Some of the most common styles are Charlotte Mason, Montessori, Steiner, School at Home, Unit Studies, Unschooling and Eclectic. I don't think the APs are extensively trained about these methods and to many educational professionals the idea that education would be 'child led' is foreign. It would be good to see these styles (and others) listed in the Information Pack with a brief outline of the style.

The Q & A document serves no purpose at all as it regularly contradicts the Information Pack. Interestingly the IP has been signed by the Education Minister and the Q & A has not. My concern is that in reading the Q & A one might think all is well, but the IP is very restrictive and regimented, at any time the APs could be told that the IP is the only way to assess a homeschooled family. The Ip should be easy to read and supportive of home education.

I understand that some APs are also school inspectors – how can school inspectors, who know about mass education possibly understand the nature of home education? It's like a multinational company understanding the barter system in a third world country.

It is difficult to access many of the benefits readily given to schooled children, gaining access often involves months of emails and telephone calls. We also receive no financial assistance despite the fact that schools are allocated funding according to the number of students enrolled.

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

“Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” Socrates

As a long term home educator with a concern for the educational, spiritual and emotional needs of my children I feel that the NSW Syllabuses are a great resource to provide quality education for my children. I can easily write a program based on the NSW syllabuses.

However as my children entered their teenaged years we found that tailoring their education to provide more opportunities to study the things they loved was a better option than forcing them to learn the things they had no interest in. This is one reason why we registered to do stage 6 rather than the available option to continue stage 5 until our daughter turned 17. She was good at Maths but did not enjoy it, registering for stage 6 meant that Maths was not compulsory and she could focus on her love of art, language and writing.

When explaining how I home educate I say that I like to give my children a taste of all the subject areas and allow them to 'run with' the subjects and topics they like. My experience of home educating and the home educating community is that home educators have a vested

interest in educating their children to a high standard. It would be a travesty to have home educating parents restricted in their goal of 'kindling a flame' because an Authorised Person judges that a family has not adhered strictly to the syllabuses when in fact the family has an incredibly strong sense of community, family and social responsibilities.

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

Our family began home educating because we felt our five year old daughter was very sensitive with a high sense of justice and would find life in the schoolyard overwhelming. One of the unexpected benefits of home educating has been the ability to show my children appropriate ways to respond to their peers when playing together. As parents we lead by example and help resolve issues that come along when interacting with their home educated peers. It's been a positive experience to teach my children how to respond in all aspects of everyday life. This would never have been possible had our daughters been at school where the schoolyard is overseen by just a few teachers. In the schoolyard individual conversations, bullying and oversight of children can not possibly be monitored with love and concern. In most cases the strongest or most outspoken child receives attention. Many children do fine in that situation, but many do not.

When our family went through my cancer diagnosis our nine year old had just completed her first year at school so she continued at school. We wanted to place our seven year old in school while I underwent treatment but she told us she wanted to be at home and help me. This was so touching and she shared the journey with me, often attending medical appointments and such. Often friends who home educated would take her to activities when I was too unwell and we felt incredibly supported by the home education community. We have experienced trauma, deaths, illnesses and recovery and the children have participated fully in these times. I feel home education is a more holistic way to experience life than

being sent away to school each day.

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

As a long term home educator I have seen the registration process in NSW gradually become overwhelming and arbitrary, particularly for those just starting their home educating journey. The Education Act clearly states that Home Education is one of the three viable methods of educating children in NSW and that the BoSTES has the responsibility to oversee this. The inclusion of parents taking responsibility to educate their own is extremely important, particularly for families who find that educating their children in a school does not work for them. What I find distressing is that a genuine, hard working family has to jump through so many hoops in order to qualify to educate their own children when it is a legal right.

If parents allow the state to educate their children it stands to reason that the state should have measures in place so that parents know their children are receiving a quality education. But if a parent is taking responsibility for educating their own, then the state should allow them to do so without onerous and draconian rules. The state should be assisting families who choose to home educate and supporting them in their educational goals. At the moment in NSW many families are made to jump through hoops which causes distress and trauma. There has to be a better way forward.

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

At various times of my life I have appreciated the support that the state can offer. When my daughters were 9, 7 & 4 I was diagnosed with breast cancer and relied on the local public school to



educate my children while receiving treatment and recovering. It would have been far better for us to access school for several days a week rather than the full five days, the school said that part time was not an option. Likewise it would have been fabulous to access the local schools music or band program, debating, sporting or some of the other curricular activities.

The barrier to accessing many government supports is that the funding is available to schools on a full-time basis so taking on a part time student is not financially viable for individual schools.

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

Australia is a great country in which to live and has a high standard of living. As the standard of living increases more options and possibilities become available, for example the use of the internet as a learning tool is a standard form of learning. Anecdotally our family has seen the numbers of home educators rapidly increase in our surrounding area. In 2001 we joined a home education choir and drama group which had less than five families represented. In 2014 this group has more than 44 families attending with a significant waiting list.

If home educating continues to increase at the same rate then home educators should be represented within BoSTES. As a valid educational option it is difficult to understand why there has never been representation.

**(f) any other related matter.**

My preferred registration process would be:

- A parent is registered to home educate when they sign a document to say they will be responsible for their child's education.
- A home educating parent may ask to be assessed by a home visit or meeting in an agreeable

place, but they are not compulsory.

- A home educating parent may request that their plan be assessed by documentation (post) but are not compulsory.
- On registering to home educate the parent can then access all of the government initiatives that schooled children access including part time schooling and public distance education.
- Parents should be able to remove their children from school as soon as they decide to home educate and have three months to register.
- APs be thoroughly trained in the nature of home education, this could be by completing a module at TAFE or university.
- That experienced home educators and teachers who have home educated are able to become APs by completing the module mentioned previously.
- That at least one home educated parent be represented on the BoSTES.
- Regarding child welfare, the parent of a home educated child should submit to working with children checks and if their record is questionable they should be monitored closely by the relevant welfare organisations.
- In the case of divorce the parent who has primary custody should be able to home educate without consent of the non-custodial parent.