

Submission
No 41

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Ms Tracey Mansted

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Partially Confidential

To:

The Director

Select Committee on Home Schooling
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

From:

Tracey Mansted

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

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My name is Tracey Mansted. My husband Mike and I home school our two daughters aged 9 and 10. We are registered with the Board of Studies.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the inquiry.

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.

I believe that although the old information pack issued by the Board of Studies was quite cumbersome a document, the latest version is completely over the top in its demand for home schooling families to comply with conditions more suited to full time paid administrators in schools.

It seems out of step with more relaxed requirements in other states and is inflammatory with its demands: for example the requirement that children can only work at one grade level across all KLAs and the implication that children are only allowed to work at the BoS' considered age appropriate level. This completely goes against individual programs for individual students – the great benefit of home school and the reason the vast majority of families make this change in their children's education.

I believe that the bureaucracy and "standardisation" of education that has swept across the states' and territories' education departments along with the "Australian Curriculum" and uptake of standardised testing such as Naplan has been applied to individual home schooling families in this new Board of Studies information pack. That is nonsensical – we have left

bricks and mortar schools because we don't want this cookie cutter style of education or our children don't fit these standard molds.

(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,

NA at this time

(ii) financial costs,

As a home schooling family we have made a significant financial investment in our children's education. We are fortunate to be even able to afford to home school and considering the fact that we are still paying tax dollars towards schools that our children do not use it seems unfair that there isn't a tax refund system in place.

Why not have a tax refund system for home schoolers that would encourage families to spend money on curriculum and teaching aids? Just as in business one would be required to have proof of purchase and this could tie in with registration as a way to encourage those unregistered home schooling families to register.

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

I have post graduate qualifications and my husband has an honours level degree. We both see education as an ongoing adventure and an activity for life – not just for the school years. We are passionate about all aspects of education and have relished the last five years day-to-day involvement in our daughters' education. We have also learnt a lot that our school education missed out upon!

I am from a family of teachers so well understand the rigors and hardship and frustrations in the school classroom. I have also taught adults in a tertiary college as well as in privately run courses.

As parents we are fortunate to be able to introduce subjects to our daughters that also are suited to our own interests – mine in music, literature, language, creativity, biology and my husband's of maths, physics, engineering, outdoor adventure, and chemistry.

Why did we homeschool? Desperation. Both girls started off in our local primary after attending a community preschool from 3 years of age. They were both early readers and started school at 4 and 2 months (NSW Department of Ed early entry gifted program) and 4 and a half years old. Socially things were good but intellectually there just wasn't enough challenge (see (v) below).

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

While we are registered, we have many friends who aren't. I believe many who aren't registered are fearful of the involvement of BoS in their lives and the judgement and intrusion that may follow.

The registration process has really become onerous with the new information pack. People have observed to me “why bother registering?” and they have a point.

Registration needs to serve a purpose other than chasing truancy or allowing access to Centrelink benefits.

If home schoolers were truly welcomed by the BoS, there would be access to the resources the Board has: for example, the huge amount of free teaching resources on the Dept of Ed website that parents cannot currently access!

As a way of encouraging registration I would suggest:

- access to the DET teachers’ resources such as lesson plans, websites, pdfs and learning units
- tax refund on money spent on curriculum and teaching resources
- free referral program to help families with special needs children so that instead of “why can’t your child read?” the BoS authorized person could say “here is the number for a special needs literacy worker” or speech therapist, or school holiday sports camp etc
- easy access to after school classes run out of schools
- access to school sports days and carnivals run by schools so that home school children can participate

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

Here is our story.

Our eldest daughter was assessed by the Dept of Ed psychologist at the age of 3.75 (while at preschool) as being ready for school a year early – starting at 4 years and 2 months. She was in a composite class at the local school which had Kinder, Year 1 and Year 2 children in it. This suited her well as she had access to three years worth of material. All went well until her second year began and she was placed in a Kinder/Year 1 class. She knew all of the work, and over time became more despondent and showed signs of depression.

In desperation we saw an educational psychologist that specialised in highly gifted children. Our daughter was assessed using the Stanford Binet 5 FSIQ test.

Her opinion was that there was no way the local school would be able to deliver educational material that was suitable – neither complex or advanced enough. We went to the school, negotiated extensively and protractedly, then when nothing eventuated we talked to our local DET supervisor and he arranged for us to have “special circumstances” access to Distance Education as our local school could not meet her needs.

She left the local school at 5 and a half. The Distance Ed school was wonderful – they had teachers trained in giftedness and the principal was outstanding.

At this point our younger daughter started at the local school.

Forewarned is forearmed so our younger daughter started Kinder with her own SB5 IQ assessment – the same percentile as her sister as it happened. We really wanted to keep her in the local school for her first year – but due to the same issues with teaching staff our younger daughter was then also offered “special circumstances” Distance Education.

We found that in reality there is no day-to-day delivery of a gifted program available in NSW country schools.

In her first year at the Distance Ed school she had completed Year 3 Naplan with outstanding results.

After a year and a half and a lot of soul searching we left the Distance Education school. By the time we left our eldest daughter was 7 years old and had been given three full years of acceleration in total placing her in year 5. But she still needed real flexibility and the Distance Education school was limited to NSW Education Department’s restrictions on syllabus and curriculum. For example, we wanted our girls to learn a foreign language – French – and there was no provision for that in Primary until Year 7 through DET. Both girls were fascinated with the Big Bang – again no curriculum materials available there either. Or Ancient Greece etc. We were already finding our own materials to supplement and satisfy the girls’ interests.

Reluctantly we left the Distance Ed school and registered with BoS for home schooling.

We have been home schooling ever since. It has been a wonderfully liberating and productive experience.

To date, our eldest daughter is working at a Year 7/8 level and our younger at a Year 6/7 level using a wide variety of materials and contexts as well as using some wonderful iBooks interactive textbooks based on the Australian Curriculum by publishers such as Pearson and Nelson.

We have stopped doing the Naplan tests as frankly they aren’t particularly helpful – too formulaic.

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

See above for our family’s experience through the local school vs distance ed vs home school.

Home schooling is wonderfully freeing for children who love to learn and have a need to know! We are able to be very flexible and tailor what we are working on to the girls’ interests and current focus.

For us, home school is not just playing “school” at home. We are out of home many hours a week doing piano lessons, children’s choir, swimming squad, netball, Scouts, surf lifesaving

Nippers, and home school group meetups. We go to writing and music festivals, exhibitions, museums, galleries, talks and walks.

In the new BoS Info Pack there are ridiculously naive restrictions on the number of hours children are to be AT HOME “working” inside at a desk. The BoS doesn’t seem to understand that home schooling occurs in all places and environments – in fact, wherever the children and parents are at any given time in our family’s case.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

I am worried about the increased involvement of the government in a family’s life at home, especially in education.

In the UK for example there is a new law that prohibits parents taking their children out of school for family holidays or travel – parents are being fined, taken to court and given criminal records because they have informed the school their children will be away with them. It has taken the parents’ right to decide away – and indeed, the schools are prohibited from granting any leave of absence.

I am concerned that this form of government intrusion into family life is coming to Australia. Indeed, the BoS new info pack prohibits travel of homeschooling families. That is absurd.

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

Previously written at (iv):

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

Our AP is excellent, but I have heard of many others who are not and indeed, do not seem to understand the law.

The laws and requirements of home schooling in NSW really do need to be the result of consultation, clarified, and agreed upon.

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

We use our own version of the syllabus, but only because it suits us and our children.

The syllabus should not be compulsory for home schooling families – just look at all of the trouble we have had as a family with the poor delivery of the compulsory syllabus in schools!

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

It has been stated by some that home school children are more likely to be the victims of abuse because they aren't seen at school everyday. I think this assumption of "not being seen" is missing the point.

Firstly, the demographic doesn't fit.

Home schooling requires enormous commitment on the part of parents. It is not an easy road – financially, socially, practically. You have to be a well resourced, willing, organised parent to home school. It is far easier to send your children to school.

Secondly, school attendance is not protective.

As a registered counsellor, I would observe that when our daughters were in the school system I saw children who were underfed, bullied and demeaned by their parents, sent to school in dirty ill-fitting clothes, and some showing signs of neglect. I didn't see any teachers making moves to assist or intervene.

I still see those children and they are still in troubling family environments – and still in public schools.

When we go to homeschool groups we notice that on the whole children are well behaved (though often busy and boisterous) and the families are always welcoming. Everyone seems happy to get along, independent of family income or culture or religion. I have really enjoyed watching our girls learn (over the years of home schooling) to talk happily and confidently with adults, teenagers, toddlers, babies, grandparents, boys and girls. Home school socialising is very much a level playing field – issues of gender and age aren't given the thought and pressure as of in the school playground.

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

I personally like the old BoS requirement and the two year planning and review cycle but I understand for many it is too daunting. The BoS need to ask and find out why it is that people do not register.

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

Access to Department of Education and Training teaching resources is a must if BoS are requiring home school families to tick the boxes of the syllabus. There are many excellent resources available to Distance Ed families that could be easily made accessible on the internet.

Financial support in the form of tax refunds would be very helpful.

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

I find it outrageous that there isn't home schooling representation on the BoS 23 member panel. Either have home schoolers represented or stop regulating us – it is that simple.

(f) any other related matter.

Thank you for having this needed inquiry. I look forward to seeing positive recommendations in the future.

Regards,

Tracey Mansted