

**Submission  
No 10**

## **INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING**

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# Submission to Legislative Council Select Committee on Home Schooling

by Heidi van Schaik, registered NSW home educator

## (a) Background of homeschooling

No comment.

## (b) Current Context of NSW Homeschooling

### (i) Outcomes

We have our own personal goals, which were quite independent from regulatory requirements: 1. literacy/English; 2. acceleration (geometry); 3. engagement; 4. achievement; 5. independence; 6. articulation (for speech disorder). We also have about a dozen strategies for achieving these goals.

Only half a year has passed with half still to go, but we have made significant inroads with English.

- ★ Goal 1: developing literacy skills: improving spelling, comprehension, grammar and writing.
- ★ Goal 3: starting to like English; previously, he only liked maths and especially hated English.
- ★ Goal 4: keeping pace with year six level workbooks with assistance, despite being functionally at stage 1 or 2 with many outcomes of this learning area.
- ★ Goal 5: learning to use the dictionary and thesaurus to independently bridge the gap that his impoverished special needs education left him with.

### (ii) Financial Costs

No comment.

### (iii) Demographics and Motivation

Parent: single mother; Aspergers or HF autistic; B.A./B.Sc.; incomplete B.Teach. (sec. maths).

Child: only child, boy, year 6; special needs (verbal dyspraxia and high functioning autistic); intelligent with high interest in academia.

My motivation is transition from support class to mainstream, in time for high school.

I always wanted him placed in mainstream, right from kindergarten. I accepted that the support class was probably best for the first couple of years. Thereafter, I repeatedly asked for steps to be taken to gradually transition him to mainstream, but my wishes were disregarded year after year.

When he was diagnosed about a year ago with dyspraxia, the speech pathologist recommended he be removed from the autism support class as soon as possible. This was because he is too high functioning (with respect to autism) to be there, and would benefit much more from the richness of social interaction in a mainstream class.

Finally, someone could see what I see! So I asked the school for immediate steps to be taken towards mainstream transition in time for high school. The school was very uncooperative, to the point of being unprofessional, and even unethical at times.

I didn't want to homeschool. I had no choice. There was now only one year left until high school. Homeschooling was the only avenue available for making the transition to mainstream honestly, competently and successfully.

#### (iv) Unregistered Homeschoolers

No comment.

#### (v) Characteristics and Educational Needs

In our particular case, the characteristics of the learner are:

- > highly intelligent and interested in academia
- > visual thinker, which is apparently an autistic strength
- > struggles with some aspects of literacy
  - spelling, due to dyspraxia
  - composing, due to visual brain
  - vocabulary, due to restricted environment of support class
- > catches on quickly with other aspects of literacy
  - grammar
  - text types

His educational needs are not necessarily what a well meaning state apparatus may think.

- ❖ More funding for support classes would not help us, because the support class context itself was our major problem.
- ❖ Funding for support staff in mainstream classes would help, because I believe special needs resources should be used to integrate, not segregate.
- ❖ Better communication and collaboration between teacher and parent would definitely help, and is free - it was in the almost total absence of such that I was forced to homeschool.

#### (vi) Comparison with Other Forms of Education

Support class: Either this or home schooling could provide individual support. However, I think the staff were neglecting him, particularly after his new diagnosis. This was because his actual disability didn't match the agenda or supposed expertise of that particular support class.

Mainstream class: Either this or home schooling could provide a strong curriculum. However, I struggle to provide a good curriculum. I would rather a good teacher did it. High school will probably be a better environment than primary, because the kids bring their school work home, so I can help.

Distance education: I initially wanted this, not homeschooling, but we weren't eligible. I wish we were, because it would have allowed me to concentrate solely on giving support, while a qualified teacher would implement the curriculum. It would have been the best of both worlds.

### (c) Regulatory Framework

#### (i) Current Processes

No comment.

#### (ii) Authorised Persons

No comment.

#### (iii) NSW Syllabuses

I find the current NSW curriculum confusing and overwhelming.

- ❖ It is confusing, because this year is the middle of the transition from old to new syllabuses, and this makes the foundation statements partially obsolete.

- ❖ It is overwhelming, because the volume of syllabus documents and support documents is huge, and I don't understand whether I have to follow everything or just the outcomes.

However, purchasable learning resources help. Our maths and English workbooks, with links to outcomes, form the core of our program. This goes some way towards resolving those problems.

#### (iv) Child Welfare

I don't have a problem with being visited. I would appreciate the feeling of the state caring about us.

I suggest more use be made of community activities that put children in public view. Perhaps a points system for community activities could be devised, so the more points the family has, the less inspections are required by the homeschooling unit.

I hear that families are expected by current regulation to stay at home more than they would like. This takes them out of sight of the community. Maybe it would be better to explicitly encourage families to strike a personal balance between home and community based activities.

#### (v) [missing]

[Typo in terms of reference.]

#### (vi) Appropriateness

Firstly, it is concerning that there is a lengthy delay before you can legally take your child out of school. For most families, this isn't an issue, because they need that time to plan a program anyway. We fell into that category. However, there needs to be a system to deal with crisis situations, so children can be removed from school immediately.

- ❖ I don't think case by case would be fair, because the system might assess that a family is not in crisis when really it is, e.g. if the school administration is antagonistic.
- ❖ I think the Queensland system of immediate interim registration for everybody would be best. Perhaps exceptions could be made for applicants who have previously proven to be incompetent, or who can be shown to be serially interrupting their child's education and where this is to the detriment of the child.
- ❖ There would also need to be curriculum support for families choosing to remove their children immediately.

Secondly, I think it would be better to focus on giving support rather than enforcing rules. For example, I'm trying to hold up my end of the bargain by trying to follow the rules. However, I feel a bit overwhelmed. I'm coping by focussing on the core subjects of English, which he struggles with, and maths, which he likes and is good at. I'm hoping enough PDHPE is being covered with sports and everyday life. I'm hoping to catch up with other subjects after we get English on track.

Thirdly, there is the state versus family agenda. The registration process provides for showing how to meet the state agenda. It would be good to explicitly ask parents to articulate their agenda. I took the initiative and did that anyway, prior to addressing all the registration criteria.

#### (d) Support Issues

Firstly, I'm not sure why, but I don't find much support within the homeschooling community. I think it's because most homeschoolers I've encountered have a liberal political agenda, i.e. small government. In contrast, I support a strong government, a strong state, so I would be more comfortable with state based support.

I've had a number of negative experiences in various contexts with homeschoolers.

- ❖ One support person guilt tripped me for wanting my own life, for only intending to homeschool for half a year, for not “caring enough” to homeschool for the long haul.
- ❖ I started attending a weekly homeschooling gathering, but I was left on the outer, not feeling part of it, having to chase up to be included on an email list I barely knew about, etc.
- ❖ I participated in a regulation discussion forum, where the agenda appeared not to be impartial open discussion, but rather, unwittingly I believe, to push an extremist liberal agenda of antagonism between individual and state. To their credit, they didn't ban me!

Secondly, I want support from within the state education system. I disagree with homeschooling and public schooling being mutually exclusive. I need state support, because I'm using one year of homeschooling as a bridge to high school, from the support class setting in primary to a mainstream setting in high school, which our former primary schools refused to cooperate with.

I feel it is inappropriate that access to public schools for socialisation and curriculum support is so much trouble. In our case, we'd be unwise to approach our local primary school before his high school enrolment is confirmed, because that principal is friends with his previous school's principal where we had all the trouble. It's a lot of effort anyway without those additional complications, so I think part time attendance at a public school should be a standard option for those who want it.

Homeschooling completely cuts the family off from support from qualified education professionals. I wanted distance education rather than home schooling, but our case didn't qualify. I wanted part time home schooling so I could focus on addressing specific problems while the school delivers most of the curriculum. I would have appreciated curriculum support from the local school, just for consistency going into high school next year.

## (e) Representation

I strongly support the inclusion of home educators on the BoSTES board. Home educators have a lot of insight to offer into curriculum development, because they tend to be innovative and resourceful. I think two mandated positions would be appropriate: one for an experienced unschooler; and one for a home educator who takes a structured approach. I also think there should be homeschooling representation on the ACARA board, but just one position there, since that board is small.

## (f) Other Matters

Here are my thoughts on the public school system. Many homeschooling families do so for the unschooling approach. Could the government establish public schools that take the unschooling approach? Or do these already exist as alternative schools? Should or could unschooling be made a mainstream option?

Here are my thoughts on the place of homeschooling in a nation state. I think the homeschooling option is necessary in a democracy, because if the state education system, or segments of it, turn bad, citizens need a backup option. I think homeschooling should be enshrined to the status of institution. It should be a high status pathway, with appropriate non-restrictive regulation.