

**Submission
No 233**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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The Director
Select Committee on Home Schooling
Parliament House
Macquarie St
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Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to the inquiry into home schooling

Thank you for inviting submissions on the topic of home schooling.

In this submission I have outlined my background and then addressed specific areas of the terms of reference.

My experience of home schooling has been incredibly positive. In retrospect, I can safely say that I would not be where I am today had I not been home educated. If I were in a mainstream school, I would be completing my HSC this year. However, in reality, I have a tertiary qualification and two-and-a-half years of full time work experience that my peers do not have. In this submission, I will be drawing on my personal experience of home education to argue for a better registration system and flexibility for home educators.

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My background

Throughout my education, I was not registered with the NSW Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (**BoSTES**). I was home schooled with (what was then called) the Australian Christian Academy (ACA), a distance educator. I completed diagnostic tests to assess my academic level at age 5 and started home schooling at Year 4/5 level in most subjects in 2002, aged 6.

I finished home schooling in 2010, aged 14, as I felt that the coursework was no longer presenting a challenge to me. I had completed a certificate in Horticulture by distance education in 2009, and was looking forward to more tertiary education. I applied to Bedford Business College and was accepted based on my academic record, which, even though I had not sat the Higher School Certificate, included High Distinctions in the Australian Maths Competition, Geography Competition and Science Competition, as well as successive annual Academic Excellence Awards (for average marks of 96% or higher) from ACA.

In 2011 I did my Diploma of Business alongside much older Year 10 and Year 12 leavers and consistently achieved the highest marks in my class. I had no trouble adjusting to learning in a tertiary institution and easily formed connections with other students and teachers. I served as Treasurer on the SRC, and at the end of the year won the Consistent Application award at my graduation ceremony.

I applied for several secretarial roles upon leaving Bedford and was interviewed by three different law firms. I eventually chose Clayton Utz and have been working there as a legal secretary ever since.

Home schooling encouraged me to think independently and fostered my passion for ideas to make the world a better place. As such, politics has always been my passion. I became a member of the YMCA NSW Youth Parliament in 2013 and 2014 and found it to be an incredibly rewarding experience. I will also be a candidate at the state election next year, a new adventure which I am looking forward to.

Current context of home schooling

Outcomes of home schooling including in relation to transition to further study and work

My thoughts heading into tertiary education at Bedford College were that I would have trouble adjusting and that I would take some time to fit in. However, to my surprise, this was not the case. I adapted quickly and well to the new learning environment. The same happened when I was transitioning to full-time work at Clayton Utz.

In my opinion, one of the biggest advantages of home schooling was being able to socialise with people from all ages and backgrounds as I was growing up, rather than just my peers. I cannot emphasise enough how much this has helped me in later life to interact with my fellow students, work colleagues (and now potential voters!) who are of course at many different stages of life.

Demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children

I was home educated because my parents had met some children of their friends who were home schooled, and were impressed by the level of intelligence and maturity displayed in their conversations with the children. As a toddler I showed signs of being very bright and this reinforced their decision to home school.

From my experience, one of the biggest motivators for parents to home school is if their children are being bullied or are otherwise struggling at school. This is why home schooling must be a viable alternative to the education system and should not be difficult to register for at short notice, as it currently is.

Extent of and reasons for unregistered home schoolers

When I was home schooling, it was generally acknowledged that for every registered family there were two unregistered ones.

Is it any wonder that there are so many unregistered home school families out there, when many who do try to register with BoSTES are consistently failing registration? This is not due to improper intentions on the part of the family, but the hoops they must jump through in order to qualify for registration.

Characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children

Over many years of involvement in home education, I have observed that home schoolers are generally better than traditionally schooled children at carrying on mature conversations with adults. They are also more self-motivated and better time managers.

Comparison of home schooling to school education including distance education

As a child I often described my comparison of home schooling to school education as looking into a box from the outside. I didn't like what was in the box. I never understood, and still don't, why schools teach in the exact same way to a whole classroom full of students. This approach leaves behind struggling students, frustrates advanced students, and frames learning as something children should only do how

and when they are told to. A classroom environment discourages a love of learning and does not recognise individual learning styles. Instead, it sends the message that there are "right" and "wrong" ways of learning, treating education like a sausage factory.

On the other hand, home schooling is supervised by a parent who is best placed to know how their child learns, whether that be through writing-based activities, visual aids or hands-on experiments, and can incorporate those things into their lessons on each subject. Home schooling takes the view that there are many ways to achieve the same educational outcome.

Another frustration I have with the school system is the concept of homework. I do not understand why schoolchildren do homework – if the material cannot be taught between 9am and 3pm, doesn't that mean that either there is too much material in the course, or that the teacher has very bad time management skills? In school, valuable classroom time is wasted maintaining order and disciplining some children while others are bored. Home schooling, on the other hand, enables the day's lessons to be taught without distraction and in a realistic timeframe that allows for flexibility. For example, when I was home schooling, I would complete my lessons in around three hours, always before lunch. Sometimes I would even get up at dawn and finish the day's work before breakfast, so that I could spend the whole day at a special event. My capacity to learn was not at all affected by what time of day I was doing it.

Regulatory framework for home schooling

Current registration processes and ways of reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers

I am convinced that the only way to reduce the number of unregistered home schoolers is to reduce the amount of regulation on registered families. I have addressed specific concerns with the current system below under "*Potential benefits or impediments to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing*".

From my experience, home educators in NSW do not want to feel as though they are 'cheating', and would like to do the right thing by the government and register, but it is the system that stops them from doing so. Currently, parents must give three months' notice to BoSTES of their intention to register to home school. As I have mentioned above, this is simply not realistic. Parents who have pulled their children out of school suddenly, perhaps due to bullying, should be able to register straight away.

Potential benefits or impediments to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing

The regulatory framework currently in place is overly strict and, I believe, is more of an impediment to children's wellbeing than a benefit. Below I have detailed specific areas of BoSTES's 2013 Information

Pack (IP) for registered home schoolers and why they are, in my opinion, counterproductive to a healthy learning environment.

Outcomes

The current IP maintains that in order to be registered, home educators in NSW must link their work to each learning outcome in the NSW syllabus and diarise when and how each child meets each outcome. There is also a requirement for a written teaching plan. To keep such records is extremely time consuming, especially for families with multiple children, and is far in excess of what school teachers are required to report on for each of their students. The outcomes are written in complex language, and it is very difficult to produce a written plan at the level of detail required under the 2013 IP, especially if the family has not yet had home education experience. From the anecdotal evidence I have heard as a member of the home education community, failing to link children's work to outcomes is the single biggest reason for home school families failing registration.

My recommendation would be to revert to the system which was previously in place under the 2011 IP, whereby home educators were required to have a learning plan based on the Foundation Statements of each key learning area in the curriculum. These Foundation Statements were much broader, and were actually a help to families creating learning plans.

Age restrictions

Students can only be taught at the year of schooling for which they are registered, unless a special application to BoSTES is made which requires a home visit from an Authorised Person (AP) to again satisfy the requirements for registration - a unnecessarily bureaucratic process. One of the great advantages of home schooling is that it allows high achieving students, who easily become bored at school, to do accelerated work - and home schooling recognises that this will not be the same level across all subjects. Placing such an inflexible framework upon home schoolers just serves to disenfranchise them with learning.

If I had been burdened with this system as a child, I would certainly not have retained the love of learning that I have today, as I would not have been able to challenge myself with more advanced work. Home schooling would have been no more beneficial than school for me.

Where and when learning can take place

According to the current IP, in order for education to count towards the "outcomes" it must take place between the hours of 9am and 3pm and must be delivered in the home by a parent.

This restriction makes no allowances for external classes, i.e. language classes, dance classes or sport, that may occur between 9am and 3pm. These things are vital to developing children's socialisation and teamwork skills. It is also important that parents are not the only people who can deliver their child's education - they should be able to send their child to specialist classes to learn what the parent is not confident in teaching themselves (such as a foreign language). Even simple educational outings, such as to the library, cannot be taken between the hours of 9 and 3 under this restriction.

Moreover, if a child finishes their day's work before 3pm, what are they then meant to do? There should be no time limits on learning.

Again, if I had been forced to adhere to this rule as a registered home schooler, I would not have been able to do many of the things which I enjoyed as a child, such as craft classes on Wednesday mornings or visits to Waverley Library on Thursdays. I would also have had to forgo many of the opportunities I had to socialise with adults. As I have already mentioned, these opportunities were some of the most valuable I had during my time as a home schooler.

Travel outside school holidays not permitted

Our family almost always elected to go on holidays during term time - there were fewer people and cheaper rates! Similarly, at Christmas time I would take more weeks of holidays before Christmas in order to enjoy the holiday season and then go 'back to school' earlier in January. If home schooled children are agreeable to having their two week break at a different time to their school friends, there's no reason why this flexibility would hinder their learning. Forcing home school families to only travel during school holidays, as is currently the case, has no clear benefit to children's safety, welfare or wellbeing.

It would seem that all of these rigorous guidelines were established with the aim of reducing the risk of child abuse and neglect. However, all children are at risk of these things – whether they are enrolled in school, registered home schoolers or unregistered home schoolers. I would even go so far as to suggest that some of the restrictions detailed above increase the risk of negligence occurring, especially those relating to being in the home between the hours of 9 and 3, and not having external classes such as language classes counted towards children's educational outcomes.

If I had been registered while the 2013 IP was in place, my learning would have been adversely affected and home schooling would have been detrimental to my welfare and wellbeing.

Appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved

The current regulatory regime is not appropriate.

There is a desperate need for more flexibility for a family's education options. If parents wish to home school their children, they should be encouraged and supported by BoSTES in their decision to do so.

Home education is not simply school at home. It should be treated completely independently.

There is currently a Home Schooling Unit within BoSTES. Ideally, I would like to see responsibility for home education moved to a completely independent department, which would report directly to the Minister for Education. This arrangement is already in place in Tasmania, where it has met with much success.

Support issues for home schooling families and barriers to accessing support

Currently, families who choose to home school are discriminated against, as they are not permitted to take advantage of resources available to school students. These include, but are not limited to, concession cards on public transport, TvET courses, access to hospital schools and school libraries.

I believe the government should do a lot more to support families who choose to home school. This might be through offering school textbooks to them at a wholesale price, or by enabling public schools to accept "part-time" home schoolers. The biggest support issue for NSW home schoolers at the present time is the lack of trust and flexibility which they are afforded by BoSTES.

Representation of home schoolers within BoSTES

The fact that there is no home schooler representation within BoSTES, when it is the body charged with overseeing home schooled students in NSW, is slightly bewildering. Seeking to make rules and regulations for home schoolers, who have no voice on the Board, is a miscarriage of proper process. Every other stakeholder group (including Catholic schools, TAFE and indigenous Australians) is represented on the Board, except for home educators. It is almost no surprise that the restrictions on home educators are excessive, as those in charge of setting the rules are operating with an inherent school system mindset.

My recommendation would be to, in the first instance, amend the Education Act (1990) so that it requires the Board to contain at least one person with knowledge and expertise in the area of home education.

There should also be proper consultation between BoSTES and home educators, especially the Home Education Association (HEA), with regard to the IP for registered home schoolers. BoSTES made no attempt to consult with HEA about the 2013 edition of the IP, even though it contained several major changes from the 2011 IP. When the HEA requested to review the 2013 IP, they were sent a copy on a Friday and the new IPs were printed on the following Monday. This so-called consultation on the part of BoSTES was in my opinion heavy-handed, serving only to enable them to tick the box to say they had consulted. Stricter guidelines for consultation should be implemented.

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission. I hope that all Committee members can work objectively to achieve a fair outcome for home schooling families.

Yours faithfully

Philippa Clark