

**Submission
No 274**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Mr Ken Woolford and Ms Suesette Adams

Date received: 3/09/2014

To: Select Committee, Inquiry into Homeschooling, NSW Legislative Council.

From: Ken Woolford and Suesette Adams:

Dear Committee members,

Thank you for this extended opportunity to submit comments relative to your inquiry.

Our Background.

We have been involved in education as registered teachers and a principal for a combined total of over seventy years. We have taught, separately and together, early childhood, primary, secondary, tertiary, special needs, private, catholic and state, international, remote Aboriginal and home school.

We have raised seven children and stepchildren. Three were homeschooled for part of their formal education years due to necessity. All our children are now adults. All are employed and six have tertiary qualifications.

We have been involved with homeschoolers for over twenty years and for the last seven we have coordinated a home school centre which has attracted well over 100 home school families since 2008, and currently caters for between 40 and 70 individual families in any six month period.

We both currently work part time as tutors at the secondary (catholic school) and tertiary (university) levels.

Re Inquiry particulars.

1 (a). We have observed locally that home schooling has grown from a small industry to a relatively large one. From our observations and readings re home schooling in Australia, New Zealand and Internationally we estimate that homeschooled children are approaching or exceeding 2 in 100 students in many countries in Australia, New Zealand, and parts of Europe, Asia and the Americas. The rate of growth indicates that a number of factors must be at play.

Our experience (informed by the long term contact with a large number of families) indicates that when they decide to home school parents are responding to the observed and expressed needs of their children. These needs, when presented to school authorities, are often denied and even resisted within the school system and are needs which, if not met, do lead (in the opinion of the parents) to diminished life outcomes for their children. With the families we have met, denied recognition of parent grievances re a school's educational practices underlies many families' decision to home school.

We would recommend at this stage two publications for the committee's consideration.

An Analysis of Parental Engagement in Contemporary Queensland Schooling. Kym MacFarlane. 2006. PhD submission , Faculty of Education. Queensland University of Technology.

Rethinking Family-School Relations: A Critique of Parental Involvement in Schooling. 2001. Maria family based education Eulina P.de Carvalho . Lawrence Erlbaum Associates . New Jersey.

Both publications demonstrate how the relationship between education authorities and families is undergoing change. One demonstration of this change is, we believe, the increasing number of families choosing to educate their children themselves.

(B) Homeschool outcomes.

(i) We have been particularly interested in research into this issue. Our own familial experiences have been positive. Most of the research of which we are aware has been conducted in the United States. Our review of research papers on home schooling published in Australia has shown a growth from a handful in the seventies to spiralling numbers in the last 15 years - literally an exponential growth.

For us, the proof of the educational pudding is in the afterlife of school which all people face. The research we have read has shown no outcomes for home educated children which would indicate that school attendance has an advantage over family centred education. Indeed, the research indicates that home based education has significant advantages academically, socially and psychologically.

With 60 000 suspensions recorded in one year in Queensland schools from a population of 780 000 students one might be tempted to question how well school based education serves the entire community. But we appreciate this inquiry is not about that.

(ii) Each homeschooled child saves taxpayers between \$10 000 and \$40 000 a year (depending on the needs of the child - about 20% of the 100 and more school age children who access our centre are Autistic). The financial cost to the general community for homeschooling is, we are confident, significantly less.

The other side of the coin (excuse the pun) is the value of the homeschooled child to themselves, their families and their communities. Again, research indicates that the resultant products of home education are likely to contribute more and cost less than the average resultant of institutional schooling. Our twenty years of experience with homeschooled children has not indicated otherwise.

(iii). Research indicates that demographics of homeschooled parents are not a significant in either choice to home school or the positive outcomes that can ensue. If one considers the now more commonly known positive outcomes achieved by homeschooled children (see above) then the attraction of families to homeschooling becomes clearer. There is available research into this field.

(iv) Again there is some research into this. Our experience is that some families choose not to register because of philosophical differences, or religious beliefs and/or the sometimes officious nature of government authorities they are obliged to interact with. We have always encouraged families to register and sought to assist them to negotiate with government representatives. Our experience is that there can be a significant difference between parent goals (the appropriate education of their children) and bureaucratic goals (the completion of predetermined and generalised requirements which may or may not apply to an individual child). Most government home school representatives we have been made aware of have been courteous and supportive, but have appeared to be constrained by regulations which conflict with homeschoolers' practices or philosophies.

(v) Homeschooled children, in our experience, have the same characteristics and educational needs as those of the general child population. The differences are that families choose to identify, prioritise and meet these needs in a fashion different from ways practised in most schools.

(vi) We have extensive school experience (including hundreds of long and intensive conferences with the parents of children taught in schools) as teachers and administrators, extensive home school experience as parents and supporters, and some experience with distance educated families.

Our reactions to this question are -

Parents we have met who have experienced distance education have usually been negative about the experience, particularly in relation to the excessive amount of work required by the courses, the inability to obtain support to the level required, the inappropriateness of the work and the lack of satisfaction experienced by both child and parent with the experience.

Parents we have met and discussed school based education with have a variety of reactions, but most are satisfied. We have encountered in recent years a disturbing number of parents who, even when tertiary qualified, look back on their school experiences very negatively. We believe research into this group could provide insights into how to improve the school experience for many children.

The hundreds of children in school we have dealt with have been generally positive about their experiences - as children usually are. They, like their parents, accept the inconsistencies of school based education as being 'part of the game'. Issues such as compulsory homework, which international research usually condemns as non productive, are accepted by families with a shrug indicating "what can one do?" I refer again to the two school-family publications mentioned earlier.

Home based education is, in our opinion, the most efficient and effective method of providing an empowering experience for parent and child alike. Research in the UK in the 1980's found that one important ingredient in the home school experience is the ability of parents to contextualise a child's learning. The benefit of this, plus a huge discrepancy in adult/ child talk in favour of homeschoolers were some of the reasons found in the UK research to make homeschooling advantageous and attractive.

Our experience of the scores of families who attend our home school centre is that most (probably all) families engage their children in regular visits to museums, learning centres, outdoor venues, theatres, musical groups, drama groups, community groups, science and maths expositions... the list goes on. They are also very proactive in guiding and supporting their children onto websites and online groups which promote learning and similar interest interaction.

(C) Regulatory frameworks

(i) We are of the opinion that home schooling is and will continue to be increasingly popular. Without a consideration of this, the regulatory position could become challenging. Historically, most people are aware of changing and changed community (if not individual) attitudes to a number of issues. With hindsight it is often surprising that earlier negative attitudes towards females voting, unwed mothers keeping their children, non European Australians being treated as equals, lasted for as long as they did. It is our opinion that the rather obvious embracing of homeschooling - despite all the social and bureaucratic handicaps it currently attracts - is an indication of a change of attitude

towards children and parenting (see [Parenting for a Peaceful World](#) by Robin Grille, a Sydney Psychologist).

These changes will impact on the concept of education and such things as syllabi. A deep and meaningful look into the learning habits of the mind - particularly the young mind- would reveal (and brain research is revealing) that our current dominant concept of a "school" does not lead to the most efficient and effective practices regarding negotiating a meeting between the child and life.

We believe that historical hindsight will give homeschooling a very positive position in the history of education in this country.

However, opinions will vary here, so any regulation needs to tread lightly out of respect for all concerned. We are confident that issues regarding child protection and safety are already in place and apply equally to school and non school based children - though recent commissions' hearings have demonstrated the dangers to children in schools.

Regulations would benefit, we believe, from acknowledging that parents have a primary concern for their children's education, whereas the state and its representatives are very much in a secondary position. Currently, regulations on homeschoolers can be seen to be more onerous than on school institutions or on distance education providers. As homeschooling parents have made the decision to take their duties as educators very seriously, and they have a direct interest in the outcomes of their children's education , there appears to be a case for less regulation rather than more.

(ii) Support personnel for homeschoolers need to be experienced in that industry. It is as different from institutional schooling as franchise food outlet cooking is from home cooking. Our experience in talking to many ex-teacher homeschooling parents is that they usually express the opinion that their classroom experiences were eventually found to be a handicap in developing their skills as homeschoolers. It would be expressing a deal of ignorance about the nature of homeschoolers and homeschooling to assume that experience as a classroom practitioner automatically qualifies one to be a supporter of homeschoolers.

The qualities we would recommend are -, ability to listen and empathise, respect for others' opinions, a sound knowledge of learning research and a willingness to learn oneself. A kind disposition would not go astray. Beginning homeschoolers are vulnerable, and are very often not philosophically where they will be a month, a year or a decade into their home school experience. An awareness of the diversity involved in homeschooling is essential. Flexibility is essential. An understanding that homeschooling parents are wanting to take back the power that schools have taken from them is essential. But the long term engagement with a homeschooling family can be a fantastic personal experience.

(iii) We have little (but some) experience with the NSW syllabus. That this is a requirement for homeschooling is, in our opinion, a failing. Virtually the only groups in our communities who can show 'other ways' to achieve positive outcomes for children are homeschooling families. No syllabus in the world can achieve equally for every child. Homeschooling families, through their 'rummaging' practices, find more effectively and efficiently what suits their children than they can through a slavish adherence to a syllabus document which is meant to cover a much wider range of children using 'standard' approaches.

The concept of a syllabus really requires a whole inquiry of its own as the idea has been challenged for so long by so many experienced educators.

If homeschoolers are to be obliged to use syllabus documents as anything more than guides (bearing in mind that many, if not most homeschoolers are well read in educational research, brain theory etc) then they need to be allowed to challenge syllabi statements and concepts.

(iv) We have encountered more children being brought into homeschooling because of safety, wellbeing and welfare issues than vice versa. Issues of bullying, assault, poor educational practice, poor interpersonal relationships, lack of friends, lack of educational support, philosophical differences between parents and schools, isolation of families within school communities and overt suggestions to families that a child or children be removed to another school have all been cited reasons from families for moving to homeschooling.

We have had reported to us by numerous families the positive results of moving children to home schooling such as - ceasing of self harming, ceasing of sleepless nights, a return to continence, a reduction in anger/aggression, an improvement in attitude to learning, an improvement in self esteem, an improvement in family cohesion and environment (in 1985, one research report cited the fourth most common stated reason for divorce as being children's homework issues), the list goes on.

(v) Friends in NSW have spoken with us about their experiences with homeschooling in that state. The first consideration, in our opinion, is to frame regulations around the support homeschoolers state they need. If regulations force homeschoolers towards outcomes they are not comfortable with then the results can be predicted. The biggest obstacle to overcome is that of the attitude of any authority figures who do not offer parents the respect they deserve.

It is helpful to acknowledge that -

(i) many homeschoolers are withdrawing their children from what could have been a traumatising school situation for both children and parents ;

(ii) that families need time to adjust to homeschooling and will often follow a (sometimes predictable) pathway in their home school journey ;

(iii) many homeschooling families undergo significant financial hardship in order to home school and

(iv) some home schoolers will decide to re enrol their children in school and may need support for this.

(D) Support.

Much of the support we believe is required by home schoolers is as we have stated above.

The first requirement is to acknowledge a family's rights to home school and the realities of their possible grievances with the existing local school system.

The recognition of the possible need for financial and professional support would be a benefit.

The recognition that the education system as it is currently structured and used is not perfect. Acknowledging that the system does not (and probably no 'system' ever could) be even adequate for all children would take a deal of pressure off representatives - teachers, principals etc- of the system, who have to act as if it is universally beneficial. Removing this pressure would allow teachers to feel less 'guilty' about not meeting all the needs of all the children in their classes. This is something no homeschooling parent I have met has ever expected from teachers. Most parents I have met acknowledge the extremely difficult job teachers undertake and accept that no teacher can meet every child's needs.

Schools would benefit from being able to support families who choose to home educate. In 22 states in the USA, public schools are required to make their individual programs available to access by homeschoolers and the schools are financially benefitted by so doing. The isolating of homeschoolers from school communities needs to be minimised. Indeed, we would recommend (based on our experience) the offering of physical centres to homeschooling communities where they could engage, as communities, in educational pursuits of their choice. We would remind the committee that each homeschooled child returns to the taxpayers \$10 000 to \$40 000 that would otherwise be spent on that child's school education. This without any lessening of that child's potential as an adult.

Given the saving to the finances of the wider community, it seems appropriate that homeschooling families be offered the support of paid advisors who have the qualities recommended above (C-ii).

(E).

As stated above, our experiences in most fields of education and with many parents from those fields, leads us to believe that homeschooled children generally achieve (researched and observed) outcomes as adults equal to or in excess of those for schooled children. The educational paths home schooling families are recognised as taking towards these outcomes for their children are varied and can conflict with the more narrow and less targeted requirements of state syllabi.

Unless BoSTES members can be sufficiently broad in their understanding of the term 'education' to acknowledge and accept the variety of valid and proven educational approaches of homeschoolers then it is impossible for homeschoolers to be adequately represented at this level. A lack of appropriate representation could be seen as discriminating against an educationally successful minority within the community who chose alternative (and personally appropriate) educational paths for their children.

(F)

We believe we have presented our case as best we can. We thank the committee for this opportunity and wish it well in its deliberations.

Ken Woolford and Suesette Adams.