

**Submission  
No 137**

## **INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING**

**Organisation:** Home Education Network

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

### **SUBMISSION TO THE NSW INQUIRY INTO HOMESCHOOLING**

The Home Education Network (HEN) is a non-profit support group for home educating families. HEN is based in Victoria but around 10% of our members live in NSW. We lodge this submission in the interests of adding to the available information on homeschooling practice in Australia, and also providing experience of the effectiveness of the Victorian regulatory regime. Because HEN's main area of operation is in Victoria, this submission will not fully address those terms of reference which require a more thorough experience of the existing NSW regulatory regime nor make recommendations as we believe that right properly lies with individual home educators living in NSW.

#### **a) The background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in**

##### **Australia and New Zealand**

Although chosen by relatively few parents, home education is common throughout the democratic world. It is important to recognise that home education is not simply 'school at home'; it is fundamentally different from schooling and for this reason the regulations and curriculum of schools are neither advantageous nor relevant to home education. The difference lies in the individualised nature of home education which enables parents to tailor an education specifically to their child's needs and abilities and to continually revise the education in response to the child's growing understanding. Methods of home education vary greatly between families but the focus is generally on learning rather than teaching. Learning at home is intensive, individual, interactive and flexible. Home education need not be confined to school hours, school days or school terms. It enables opportunities for cross-age learning, cross-subject learning and impromptu excursions at a level not available in a classroom.

## **The regulation of home education in Victoria**

In Victoria the law requires home educators to register with the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority.

Registration is a simple process for parents who complete a form with their name, the name of the child, address, and child's birth date; they then attach a birth certificate and sign to say they'll provide regular and efficient instruction that broadly addresses the 8 key learning areas, and adhere to some democratic principles. Providing the form is correctly completed and there is no court order in regards to the child's education (e.g. from the family court), registration is automatic and parents receive confirmation within a fortnight. Children can legally be kept home from school once the application is submitted. There is no requirement to submit work, have lesson plans approved or be inspected. Once a year parents receive a renewal form to continue registration into the following year.

The experience of the Victorian home education regime demonstrates that a light touch regime works well. There have, as far as we are aware, been no cases of concern raised by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority in relation to the current registration regime since its inception.

The advantages of the Victorian system are:

- Anecdotal evidence indicates an extremely high rate of registration compliance in Victoria while other states with more onerous registration regimes are reported to have quite low registration rates.
- Registration allows the government to know when children are being home educated and how many there are.
- Registration is a simple process for parents to navigate and allows them to concentrate their efforts on educating the child/ren.
- The process allows for the fast removal of children from school. Although home education is generally a decision parents reach after considerable research and thought, this provision is important as it allows for situations where home education has been prompted by a crisis.
- The law allows the VRQA to examine the records and materials of a home education family where there is reasonable cause for concern.
- There is provision for registered home education students to negotiate part-time school attendance. This option to have 'a foot in each camp' provides the perfect educational balance for some families.
- There is provision for home educated students to transfer to Distance Education for VCE if they wish to do so provided they have been registered with the VRQA for at least 12 months.

The disadvantages of the Victorian system are:

- Applying to register implies that parents must seek permission to home educate. HEN maintains that parents have the right to home educate and that registration is a matter of notifying the government of this intention.
- A parent can be delivering an excellent education to their children but, if unregistered, is committing an offence.

- Centrelink does not recognise VRQA registration as satisfying the eligibility requirements for Youth Allowance or the Family Tax Benefit Part A for students over 16. This leaves low income home educated students aged 16 and over without a Centrelink payment and, consequently, without a Healthcare card.
- There is no education department support for those home educators who would wish to avail themselves of it.
- There is no relationship between the VRQA/education department and home education support groups and new home educators are not directed to such groups for assistance.
- There is no provision for Year 10 certificates as under the NSW system. This option may appeal to some families but in general Victorian home educated students move onto further education without needing a Year 10 certificate.
- There is no provision for home educators to apply for an ‘exemption from registration’ as in NSW. This option may appeal to some families.

**(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**

Although we have no information on NSW home education results specifically, there is a growing number of young people across Australia who have never been to school but have received a fine education at home and are now either employed, running their own businesses or furthering their studies at university or a TAFE college. Employers and universities find that such students meet and often exceed their expectations. Home education promotes independence and self-motivation as well as building positive relationships. Home educated children become lifelong learners and responsible citizens able to adapt to the changing nature of society. In a literature review of the research on home education in Australia, Dr Glenda Jackson sums up:

*Research on home education in Australia has a small but growing presence. Parent reasons for home educating have been extensively explored while student academic success has not attracted much Australian research. Socialisation has been examined in different ways by a number of studies. Demographic material on home educating families has been collected. A few projects have specifically focused on student perceptions of their home education experience. [Studies of] Students with specific needs have been conducted by a couple of researchers. Home educator interactions with networks, their use of community resources and their needs for appropriate information have also been analysed. Throughout the research problems with home education were identified. The most contentious issue identified was parent resistance to legislation and regulation.<sup>i</sup>*

Home educated students have been accepted at many Australian universities including Melbourne, Monash, LaTrobe and R.M.I.T., in fact we do not know of an Australian university which has not admitted a home educated student. In her own PhD thesis, Dr Jackson found that Australian home educated students transferred successfully into mainstream schools and higher education. Teachers reported home educated students entering mainstream schools to exhibit above average literacy and numeracy skills and Dr Jackson noted this was consistent with the previous Australian and overseas research. There was also a generally positive teacher assessment of the social competency of home educated students entering school. <sup>ii</sup>

Similarly, Dr Alan Thomas found “With regard to academic achievement, home-educated children are generally found to be ahead of their peers in school.”<sup>iii</sup> Dr Thomas also wrote at some length about the voracious reading and enjoyment of reading evident in home educating families and found that the attitude of both the parents and children “is nothing less than a celebration of literacy.” <sup>iv</sup>

Impressive academic results have been observable in the U.S. for at least 20 years with home-educated children surpassing the national averages on both the major college-entrance tests. Time Magazine reported that "the average home schooler's SAT score is 1100 - 80 points higher than the average score for the general population." Dr Lawrence Rudner's research covered 20,760 home-schooled students and found that in every subject and at every grade level, they scored significantly higher than their public and private school counterparts. Dr Brian Ray found that by Grade 8, the average home schooled student performs four grade levels above the national average and an English study found that home schooled students noticeably out-performed their public school peers in both literacy and mathematics.<sup>v</sup> In 2003 the largest ever survey of adults who were home educated in America confirmed the results of numerous previous studies indicating that home educated students are more likely than conventionally schooled students to enter university, they are employed in a wide variety of occupations, are active and involved in their communities and are more content than the average adult. Most tellingly perhaps, 95% of those surveyed were glad they had been home educated and 82% said they would home educate their own children.<sup>vi</sup>

Research also shows that, not only does home education give good academic results; but children's academic results are higher the longer they have been home educated.<sup>vii</sup> When you consider this in conjunction with research indicating that 71% of home educators custom design their curriculum to suit

their child's needs<sup>viii</sup>, it becomes apparent that such self-improvement should not be hampered by rigid regulations.

Numerous studies have looked at the social aspect of home education and not found any disadvantages for home educated students. Gary Knowles, for example, investigated the long-term effects of home-education and said, "I have found no evidence that these adults were even moderately disadvantaged...Two thirds of them were married, the norm for adults their age, and none were unemployed or on any form of welfare assistance."<sup>ix</sup>

In relation to registration, a Moore Foundation study of unregistered home educators arrested for truancy found that their children ranked 30 percent higher on standard tests than the average schooled child and Dr Ray's comparison of home educated students' performance in highly regulated, moderately regulated and unregulated American states found that their good results hold true regardless of the level of regulation. "That is, the degree of government regulation has no significant effect on the academic performance of home schooled children. It was found that whether a given state imposes a high or low degree of regulation, home schooled students' average test scores are at the 86th percentile." In Australia, Terry Harding conducted a study comparing test results of regulated home educated students in Queensland with unregulated Victorian students (prior to registration being a legal requirement in Victoria) and found unregulated students' results equalled or exceeded those of their regulated counterparts in most areas.<sup>x</sup>

In addition the empirical evidence demonstrates that home education 'may be conducive to eliminating the potential negative effects of certain background factors' such as low income, low parental educational level, race or ethnicity, number of siblings and so on.<sup>xi</sup>

## **(ii) financial costs**

Home educators bear the full cost of educating their children and therefore home education saves the government money. For example; a Ministerial Working Party on Home Education found that the cost of home-educating a child in Tasmania was around \$2000 p.a., which was 40% of the cost of state school education at that time.<sup>xii</sup>

Again, similar findings have been made overseas. Patrick Basham found that Canadian home educating families spent \$546 per student producing an average 85<sup>th</sup> percentile test score while it costs \$5325 per public school student to achieve an average score at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile.<sup>xiii</sup> In 1998 Lyman's research

produced similar results and she concluded, "Home schooling has produced literate students with minimal government interference at a fraction of the cost of any government program".<sup>xiv</sup>

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

We have no information to contribute on the demographics of NSW home educators specifically the Australian home education research indicates "Home educators come from all walks of life, from every corner of the country, from varying income brackets, and with various levels of education. None of these features appears to impact upon their success in educating their children."<sup>xv</sup>

The Victorian experience suggests motivation factors for home education include:

- Strong parental responsibility for their own children.
- Children experiencing school problems – sexual assault, assault, bullying; self-harm; a mismatch of learning and teaching styles; a personality clash with a teacher; or children simply not fitting in.
- Special needs – whether physical, intellectual or emotional.
- Parental objections to mainstream schooling: some feel school imposes too early a separation; many find that children miss out in some important way by attending school through loss of self-esteem and creativity, a breakdown of inter-sibling relationships or a loss of initiative or independence. Some parents object to school on philosophical and religious grounds.

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

There are several factors that contribute to non-registration throughout Australia:

- The more onerous and rigid a registration regime, the less likely home educators are to register.
- The level of documentation required can be quite overwhelming both in quantity and in eduspeak and much of what is required is more appropriate to classroom planning than to a home education situation.
- Home visits can be daunting, intrusive and judgmental.
- A culture of processing rather than support.
- Time spent planning and record-keeping can be better spent on facilitating learning.
- Where application and approval processes are lengthy, parents are more likely to proceed without registration.
- Fear of regulation creep.
- A philosophical refusal to ask permission to educate their own children.

## **(c) regulatory framework for home schooling**

Whilst deferring to the more relevant experience of NSW home educators with the overall regulatory framework, we point out the following issues with the 2013 information pack:

- Most home educators strongly object to prescribed teaching methods and curriculum because they wish to tailor an education to their specific children. All children are different and there is no one 'right' way to educate children. There has never been and never will be unanimity as to what students should learn let alone the method by which they should learn.
- A requirement for additional paperwork does not respect the significant commitment made by parents who undertake the education of their children and accept the associated responsibility.
- A regime that makes home education more burdensome or that limits the home educator's ability to choose alternative methods, hampers their ability to home educate successfully and limits the chances of children's individual educational needs being catered for adequately. Ultimately, the state pays more for such a regime – and it pays twice in monitoring the regulations and paying for the education of those students who are failing in school and whose needs could be better met by home education.
- It increases the chances of children's educational needs remaining unmet – if parents' basically have to reproduce the system that wasn't working for the child, home education is unlikely to succeed and could result in children not reaching their potential.
- The lengthy registration process makes no allowance for the hasty withdrawal of children from school in the event of the child's best interests requiring it. It would be unreasonable if the parent were to risk truancy fines or the rejection of a home education application when the child's immediate safety depended on their withdrawal from school.
- A three month process for registration is unreasonably long for any home educator. Across the border in Victoria, homeschooling registrations are processed in 14 days.
- The requirement to set and meet specific learning outcomes is unfair. While benchmarks are all very well, learning outcomes cannot be predetermined at an individual level as children learn at different rates. There is no one curriculum which guarantees any given learning outcome. The state cannot guarantee that any child attending an approved NSW school (whether state or private) will emerge having met the required outcomes. In order to prove that any parent's home education plans were inadequate, the state would need to show that its own curriculum does in fact produce, in its own schools, better results than the parents are likely to get at home conducting the education of their children in the manner they see fit. There is a minority of students who will never meet the required outcomes. It would be monumentally unfair to deny these children the benefits of learning in a secure home environment and the opportunity to meet their own best level of education simply because they are unable to meet the predetermined outcomes – outcomes



they would be equally unable to meet if they attended school. There are also those students who we regard as “late bloomers” who’s opportunity to realise their potential lies in the individual and personalised attention they receive as part of their home education. We feel it is essential not to jeopardize the future of these students by an over-zealous attitude which assumes that failure to meet predetermined outcomes in the early years demonstrates a fault with the educational provision and subsequently leads to home schooling deregistration.

- Networking is an important aspect of home education and prevents the isolation of families. Home education is not confined to one place. Families utilise many and varied facilities within the community (e.g. libraries, sporting facilities, parks, museums etc) rather than spending all school hours at home. It is also common practice for home educators to network on a weekly or fortnightly basis and to attend occasional activities, excursions and camps. Networking also represents a form of self-regulation by providing valuable support to home educators; information on resources and home education methods etc; and promotes good home educating and parenting practice. We are concerned that the requirement that “the educational program upon which a child’s registration is based must be delivered in the child’s home” would unnecessarily isolate home educators, and effectively confine them to their homes. Given the undisputed benefit of social interaction for children, this requirement is counter-productive.
- Parents have a democratically and internationally recognised right to determine the manner in which their children are educated. This right is upheld by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which provides that, “Parents have the prior right to determine the form their children’s education.” Logically, the State’s right to intervene in the education process is limited to ensuring that the children’s right to education is fulfilled. This is reflected in the NSW Education Act 1990 which states, “The education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child’s parents”. The requirement for a home educator’s program to be based on the Board of Studies syllabuses contradicts this right and responsibility. In addition the Convention on Children’s Rights states that education shall be based on “the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and, given that not all children are the same, a diversity of approaches is conducive to achieving this.
- Although the information pack indicates that the family would be contacted to arrange a mutually convenient time for home visits, there is concern amongst the community that home educators could be pressured into such meetings at short notice and that ‘from time to time’ sets no limit on how often such visits could take place.
- Some students learn at such a pace and in such myriad ways that the requirement to stick to the curriculum or give advance notice of any departures from the registered year level does not reflect the reality of

catering for students individually and being able to ‘seize the moment’ when an interest or opportunity arises or to extend students without prior permission. Sometimes students get through work at an unexpected rate and having to mark time and wait for permission to move on is counterproductive. Similarly, for struggling students, it is realistic for parents to be able to slow down and ensure students understand material covered rather than keeping pace with the curriculum at the expense of true understanding. Even for highly structured home educators, in some instances, it becomes evident that it would be beneficial to go back and do some foundational work from an earlier level. Again, the approval required for any departure from the specified grade level, renders this a breach of the registration requirements and the waiting for approval wastes valuable time.

In summary, the information pack fails to recognise the diversity of home education practice and is far too restrictive. In essence it is like requiring that families seek permission to cook at home instead of frequenting restaurants and then dictating the menu, the ingredients and the method while insisting on a level of paperwork more appropriate to large-scale food preparation. In addition, pre-approval would be required in order to cook any day’s menu on the ‘wrong’ day. Implementing this attitude in a home education regime does not respect the parents’ right to choose and implement the best education for their child.

The current registration regime and associated information pack render it likely that a family providing a highly successful home education that does not comply with the Board of Studies curriculum could be deregistered. Such a situation is at variance with the parents’ right to determine the manner of a child’s education.

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

Home education regulation should only ever be designed after extensive consultation with the home education community and then undertaken by experienced home educators who understand a broad spectrum of home education styles. This would ensure administrators are capable of offering assistance and advice appropriate to home education rather than a classroom environment.

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

**Home educating without a curriculum**

The notion of home education without a preconceived structure, curriculum or lesson plans can make a mainstream educator shudder as they fear this equals “letting children run amok”. However, home education by its individual and home-based nature, is

more of a partnership between parent and child than is possible in a classroom situation, given the teacher/child ratio and therefore can involve much more freedom without resulting in chaos. Home educating parents are able to facilitate learning on a much more ad hoc basis and a curriculum is not strictly necessary. Alan Thomas's research found that approaches to home education varied greatly but that "most families who start out 'doing school' at home find that what works in school does not transfer easily to the home. Of necessity, home educators find themselves pioneering new educational approaches, nearly always less formal ones."<sup>xvi</sup> On examining a mother's record of her daughter's activities Thomas found "It demonstrated clearly that though this child's opportunities for learning were haphazard, unstructured and arose simply on an 'as and when' basis in the course of everyday living, she nevertheless ended up on a par with her primary school contemporaries at age eleven. Somehow or other, all the seemingly unrelated bits and pieces had coalesced into a basic mathematical understanding."<sup>xvii</sup>

Home educating families range from very formal to very informal but even the least formal of home educators are highly committed to their children's education. Alan Thomas' research indicates that home education often looks nothing like schooling but is still highly effective regardless of how formal it was. Dr John Peacock's study found that despite one home educating father's own concerns that his children weren't spending much time learning, his children were doing 5.17 hours of focused learning in a day.<sup>xviii</sup> The first generation of Australian home educated students, including natural learners, are now adults and, like their more formally home educated peers, are making their way in the community as useful members of society. They are thoughtful and well-educated young people. Many of them are university educated, some to PhD level.

One of the benefits of home education is that it removes the artificial distinction between living and learning, consequently the concept of school days and times is irrelevant to home education. Education starts the moment a child wakes up. Alan Thomas found, "Because formal lessons at home are one-to-one, they tend to be highly intensive. In consequence a whole day's teaching and learning is too much. Typically, the first change is to reduce the teaching day....Lessons can be as short or as long as necessary. If a child is not learning for some reason, because she's tired, can't concentrate or is simply having an off day, the parent doesn't have to persist. There can be nothing as unproductive as teaching someone who's not learning anything. The lesson can be dropped and picked up later. Conversely, if a child becomes absorbed, a lesson or activity can go on for as long as the interest lasts, for hours, days or longer."<sup>xix</sup> This flexibility leads parents to be highly observant of children's learning even in child-led activities and to therefore allow children more control over their own learning. Research is demonstrating the effectiveness of this, for example, a recent study by psychologists at the University of Colorado found "The more time that children spent in less-structured activities, the better their self-directed executive functioning." They defined executive functioning as "the cognitive control processes that regulate thought and action in support of goal-directed behaviour". These support a number of higher-level cognitive processes, including planning and decision-making, maintenance and manipulation of information in memory, inhibition of unwanted thoughts, feelings, and actions, and flexible shifting from one task to another.<sup>xx</sup>

It is also common home educator practice to spread learning over the entire year rather than limiting it to school days. This means that we do not spend every school day working but that our children also learn outside school hours, outside school days and outside school terms. Many families choose to take their holidays during term time, for example, and work through the school holidays. Indeed even our outings and holidays do not constitute ‘time off’ from learning as we consider the world to be our classroom and take full advantage of any learning opportunities whilst away from home – from map-reading skills to local history, geography, botany, geology, nature study and so on.

### **General comments**

Parents who choose to home educate are highly committed to their children’s education and it is their democratic right to choose the form that education will take. Home education represents a significant commitment by parents. This is true both in terms of time and lost income. In addition home educators bear the full cost of educating their children and receive no government funding. Subjecting parents to additional paperwork and planning time does not respect this commitment and, instead, diverts the parents’ focus from education to planning and record-keeping. Whilst the degree of regulation of home education does not improve the standard of education received by its children, it does make the parents’ task more difficult.

A free society cannot survive without a diversity of ideas. Home education promotes such diversity. Perhaps the findings home educators make will be of benefit to the state education of the future, focused as home education is on children’s learning and development unhampered by the administrative concerns associated with running schools.

Yours faithfully,

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Home Education Network

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<sup>i</sup> Jackson, Glenda: [Summary of Australian Research on Home Education](#) p2

<sup>ii</sup> Jackson, Glenda *More than One Way to Learn: Home Educated Students Transitions between Home and School*, doctoral thesis, Monash University, 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Thomas, Alan. (2002) [Informal learning, home education and homeschooling](#).

<sup>iv</sup> Thomas, Alan: *Educating Children at Home*, Cassell 1998, p 107.

<sup>v</sup> Ray, Brian: *Strengths of their own: Homeschoolers Across America: Academic Achievement, Family Characteristics, and Longitudinal Traits*, Salem (1997)

<sup>vi</sup> Ray, Brian: *Homeschooling Grows Up* National Home Education Research Institute (US), 2003

<sup>vii</sup> Rudner, Lawrence: [Home Schooling Works](#), 1999

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- <sup>viii</sup> Ray, Brian: *Home Education Across the United States*. Home School Legal Defence Association Research Study, 1997.
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- <sup>x</sup> Harding, Terry: A comparison of the academic results of students monitored by the State, with the academic results of students not monitored by the State. In A submission for the Home Schooling Review, (pp. 6). Brisbane: Australian Christian Academy (2003).
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- <sup>xiii</sup> Basham, Patrick: *Homeschooling: From the Extreme to the Mainstream*, Cato Institute 2001
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- <sup>xv</sup> Jackson, Glenda: [\*Summary of Australian Research on Home Education\*](#)
- <sup>xvi</sup> Thomas, Alan. (2002) [\*Informal learning, home education and homeschooling\*](#).
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- <sup>xviii</sup> Barratt-Peacock, Dr John: *The Why and How of Australian Home Education*, doctoral thesis, LaTrobe University 1997.
- <sup>xix</sup> Thomas, Alan. (2002) [\*Informal learning, home education and homeschooling\*](#).
- <sup>xx</sup> Barker, Semenov, Michaelson, Provan, Snyder and Munakata *Less-structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning* in *Frontiers in Psychology*, June 2014 <http://journal.frontiersin.org/Journal/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00593/full>