

Submission
No 147

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. We would like to introduce ourselves. Susan is a registered teacher who spent many years teaching and learning with with primary aged children in various school settings before our first child came along. She is also on the committee of Home Education Australia (HEA - an incorporated association that supports and provides services for Australian home educators) and is one of the organisers of the local home educating group. Chris is the director of his own accounting practice, a member of the Chamber of Commerce and a volunteer fire-fighter. He also has a teaching qualification and experience. We moved our family to the country four years ago seeking a comfortable place to raise our children.

Knowing from observation and experience that our child would not thrive in a traditional school setting, we tried several alternatives before settling on home education. This has turned out to be the best decision for our child's well-being, education and social development. Extended family can see and have commented on the positive effect that home education has had on our child. Since beginning this journey and seeing the effect on our family, we have become passionate supporters of home educating and seek to assist the inquiry for the benefit of all NSW home educators.

We would like to comment on the following terms of reference:

(b) the current context of home schooling in New South Wales including:

(ii) financial costs,

Home education allows children to have their education tailored exactly to fit their unique needs but parents wear a great cost for this privilege. In our family, we are foregoing one professional wage in order to provide education for our child. We are fortunate that there are two of us (many home educators are single parents) and that we are able to live very frugally on one income. From our work with a local independent school, we understand that each child in school represents a significant sum of state and federal governmental financial support – in excess of \$10,000 per year. Home educators, by removing their children from schools, are not only relieving the government of this burden, they are also wearing that cost from their own pockets without any additional compensation. It is not an easy choice and is certainly not undertaken lightly. Generally, parents who home educate are making a very conscious choice to forgo financial gains in order to provide the best for their children.

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

As stated above, in our family both parents have tertiary qualifications and have had successful professional careers. We both wanted the best start in life for our children and began researching education when the time was right for our first child. Our understanding is that, under the Education Act 1990, “the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child’s parents” but that most

parents delegate this responsibility to a school. We have chosen not to delegate but to take on the full responsibility ourselves. Our reasons for this include providing an education that is better able to meet the unique learning needs of our child. Having first undertaken home educating as a trial, we saw in our child improvements which were immediately apparent and continue in great leaps to this day. We are now dedicated home educators and will offer the choice to our younger son when he becomes old enough.

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

In our local home educating community there are families who, for various reasons, are not registered. As qualified teachers with only one child currently requiring to be registered, we are easily able to work through the educational jargon and meet the current requirements of NSW registration as set out by BoSTES. We cannot imagine keeping up with these requirements if we had more than a couple of registered children or if any of our children had high-levels of special needs.

As it stands, the current record-keeping requirements are, in our opinion, greater than that which is required by a classroom teacher. We would argue that a home educating parent, in fact, has a lesser need to keep detailed records. A classroom teacher has to keep track of some 25-30 children who are attending school for just 6 hours per day, of which a maximum of 4.5 hours are spent under the direct gaze of the class teacher. In this case, good record-keeping, exams, checklists, and the like are necessary to ensure that all the strengths and weaknesses of each child are recorded and acted upon. In the case of a home educating parent, only a small handful of children are present up to 24 hours in a day, of which perhaps 18 are waking hours directly under the gaze of a parent. We can clearly observe strengths and weaknesses and immediately act upon them as they come up. While good record-keeping is certainly a benefit to home educators, the extent that BoSTES requires is unnecessary in this environment. For example, most home educators would say that it takes far less time to cover curriculum materials than it would be expected in a classroom, yet BoSTES wants to see a timetable which reflects a certain number of hours spent on each subject. It is this record-keeping requirement which is off-putting for many who might otherwise register.

When discussing why local families do not wish to register, we have heard the same reasons many times:

- “The record-keeping requirements are too onerous or time-consuming.”
- “Our children (or family) have special needs which do not fit well with BoSTES requirements.”
- “The registration system feels too focused on 'policing' parents than on supporting parents.”
- “The jargon used by BoSTES is not easy to understand or use in planning.”
- “BoSTES/our AP does not support our method of home education.”

We understand from our research that states such as Victoria and Tasmania have much less onerous registration requirements. We also observe that some NSW home educators get around the requirements by registering their families in states other than NSW. We see this as an act of civil disobedience and our opinion is that civil disobedience is bred from from unjust laws. We believe that if the NSW registration process was simpler, more supportive and more understanding of home educators' needs, more people would register.

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

Our child has a way of learning that is not unique but it is not well-supported by traditional school environments. He has very high level abstract thinking skills and reads at high school level even though he is only ten years old. He understands science and mathematics concepts years above what the NSW curriculum requires for his age, yet he is still working on recall of his times tables. His literacy skills show a similar pattern - a very high level of reading skills but he is a reluctant writer who needs a lot of one-to-one time to produce a text comparative to peers in school. He taught himself to swim at four years old and to read at six years old, yet he can refuse instruction unless he is keenly interested in the topic or the teacher. In a school setting, this resulted in boredom and withdrawal as he was asked to repeat basic drills while his mind was busy working on much higher level problem solving. Home education has allowed us to tailor our child's learning program to suit this way of thinking and to provide support in exactly the areas needed. Without home education as an option, our child would have continued to withdraw from learning as time went on.

Socially, since beginning home education, our son has had more opportunities to interact with a wide range of people – extended family, community members, other home educated students and students in his extra-curricular classes. He says that he has more chances to interact with his friends now than at school. These opportunities have allowed our child's social skills to blossom – we now often receive favorable comments from complete strangers regarding his manner and approach. Extended family members have commented on the improvement in his social skills and directly attribute it to being home educated.

We are appreciative of the option to home educate.

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

Unlike traditional schooling, we are able to turn the whole world into our classroom, working educationally-rich experiences into everyday life. While at home, we undertake traditional book work just as any child in school. During any given week however, we take every opportunity outside the home to put theory into practice. Maths lessons in money, geometry and measurement become practically applied with a trip to the hardware store to collect materials for a building project. Theatre productions, book signings, library workshops and writers festivals can all be included in our English curriculum as educational and engaging activities that our whole family can enjoy. We spend time at the pool in summer not just practising our strokes but dreaming up new games as we connect with other home educators. I believe it is a common misconception that homeschoolers are isolated at home day in, day out – one which has little basis in fact from our observations of our fellow home educators. Our children are out and about in their community, interacting with a much wider variety of people than would be possible in a school setting.

In comparison to either school or distance education, home education allows the unique opportunity to tailor the curriculum and delivery to the individual needs of the child. We would argue that this is the strength of home education and the main reason than many undertake it in the first place. If restrictions are placed on parents as to which stage they may teach (eg. determined by age, not ability) or how they must deliver the curriculum, then this removes much of the advantage of home education over more traditional deliveries. For children with unique learning styles or special needs, it becomes a very difficult task indeed. We would prefer to see BoSTES approach home education with a culture of flexibility to allow home educators to tailor their programs precisely to the needs of their individual

children. This is reflected in the current practice of other states.

(c) *regulatory framework for home schooling including:*

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

While we have had no experience with the alternatives, we believe that the registration process in NSW is unnecessarily difficult and daunting. While we have been able to achieve registration easily, we believe that this is mainly due to our prior experience with traditional education. A parent new to dealing with bodies such as BoSTES, while more than capable of educating their child, would not be as confident presenting a plan and keeping records. In fact, many report finding it a stressful process. It is lucky that home educators are very supportive of each other and interact in a wide range of settings as this allows newer parents to be mentored by those more experienced.

We believe that many of those who choose not to register do so because they do not wish to be subjected to this overly officious process. As ex-teachers, our observation is that the record keeping and planning requirement for each child is more involved for a home educator than a classroom teacher. Classroom teachers work with a tacit understanding that they can deliver education and it is only when something goes seriously wrong that questions are asked. Parents wishing to home educate, who in fact have a higher vested interest in doing a good job, are questioned from the beginning as to their motives, delivery, location and learning environment before they even get to planning and record-keeping. Generally, parents have done a great job of educating their children up until they reach school age (without a curriculum or any record keeping) – there is generally no reason to think that this would not continue throughout the school-age years. Of course there will always be parents who are neglectful and abusive to children – these are issues aside from registering for home education and should be addressed by government bodies other than BoSTES.

Our own experience has been somewhat positive mainly because the AP for this area is a supportive and kind person. Many parents in the wider home educating community have reported very different experiences, more in line with our experience with BoSTES as an entity. It feels like parents who choose to home educate are in some way 'the bad guys' and BoSTES are the 'police' - out to check up on us and catch us out. Our understanding is that, under the Education Act, “the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child’s parents” but that most parents delegate this responsibility to a school. We have chosen not to delegate but to take on the full responsibility ourselves. This is not taken on lightly and it is not without financial and personal sacrifice. We feel that the majority of parents choose home educating because it is in the best interest of their child, not because it is an easier choice (it isn't). To have so much questioning of our teaching with little actual support feels like a government body overstepping its duties and infringing on our liberties.

We would like to see more active support of home educators by BoSTES. This would include:

- Ensuring that Information Packs are written in consultation with bodies such as HEA.
- Ensuring that BoSTES has at least one person who is an experienced home educator among its members.
- Training of Authorised Persons in the unique needs of home educators – a traditional school background is not enough to provide the support and understanding that home educators need.
- A registration process that is written in plain English, is easy to understand and carry out, with as little record-keeping requirement as is practical.

- To have the main role of BoSTES as one of support for parents and to have this reflected in the culture and practice of the entire registration process.

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

As we understand it, there are 23 members on the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES). They currently include teachers, principals, nominees of the Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools, an expert in early childhood education, an Aboriginal person and various others. There is no member representing home educators on the Board, even though BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW. We believe that the current dissatisfaction we observe with BoSTES among our home educating cohort has been generated in part by decision making for home educators being undertaken by a group of people with no direct understanding of the daily experience of a home educating parent. The experience of classroom teaching in a public school bears little relation to the experience of a homeschooling parent. We had no idea of the very different needs and challenges of home educators until we began and found that our years of classroom experience counted for little. To ensure that future decision making processes accurately represent the home education community, we strongly believe that BoSTES should be required to have a member who understands and can voice the very different needs of home educators – not just the theory but the practice.

Conclusions

We would like to take the opportunity to quote directly from the Education Act 1990:

EDUCATION ACT 1990 - SECT 4 Principles on which this Act is based

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In enacting this Act, Parliament has had regard to the following principles:

- (a) every child has the right to receive an education,
- (b) the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child's parents,
- (c) it is the duty of the State to ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality,
- (d) the principal responsibility of the State in the education of children is the provision of public education.

We began writing this submission with the idea that the current process of registration for home education in NSW is unnecessarily difficult but have found that the process of writing has allowed us to gather our thoughts into a clear message. The Education Act sets out the roles of both the parent and the State in a child's education as detailed above. Parents, with their children's best interests at heart and who consciously choose home education, are best placed to determine how to deliver a high quality

education to their children. BoSTES, in trying to ensure that home education is of high quality, has mistaken 'homeschooling' for 'school at home' and is trying to project school methods of education onto home educators. The reality is that home education is totally different to either school or distance education. While we can understand the need for a certain level of monitoring of children's education when undertaken at home, the current model is excessive and requires more of parents than would be required of classroom teachers. We would like to see home educators among the membership of BoSTES to ensure that a common ground can be found between the needs of home educators and the needs of the State.

We thank you for your time and appreciate the opportunity to be heard.

Susan and Chris de Wall