

**Submission
No 178**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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The Director

Select Committee on Home Schooling

Parliament House

Macquarie St

Sydney NSW 2000

To the Director,

Please accept my submission to the inquiry into home schooling.

My interest in the inquiry is primarily as a parent to three home educated children living in NSW, and as an educationalist.

Many home educators, including my family, request that:

1. An Independent body is set up to oversee home and family education (which includes representation from the home education sector and alternative educators). This independent body would be directly responsible to the Minister of Education (and not administered through the Board of Studies).
2. That registration is a simple process, with minimal intervention, that is based on a new Information Package through consultation with home educators, under the governance of the above mentioned Independent Advisory Body. (That it should be registration and not regulation.)
3. That Home Educators have access to Educational Support Services which are currently available to those in the school system such as access to the hospital school, travel passes, TAFE, TvET courses, part-time schooling, school libraries, chemistry laboratories, extracurricular activities run by schools such as language classes, dance, sports, music and orchestra etc.

I write with reference to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference, under the relevant headings:

1. That a select committee be established to inquire into and report on home schooling in New South Wales, and in particular:

(a) The background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand

The A.C.T., Victoria and Tasmania have more supportive and simpler processes for registration for home education. The NSW Board of Studies (BoS) which oversees home education in NSW has a process which is cumbersome and can be unfairly administered. The BoS's increasing emphasis on monitoring and regulation may be to the detriment of a child's long term educational outcomes and well-being.

(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

National studies need to be undertaken to demonstrate long term educational, social, employment outcomes and impact on overall well-being and community participation for home educated children in Australia. International studies indicate that home-educated children perform as well or better academically (Barwegen et al, 2004; Blok, 2004; Cogan, 2010; Meighan, 1995; Martin-Chang, Gould & Meuse, 2011; Rudner, 1999; Saunders, 2006; Snyder, 2013) at school, college and university. This may be partly attributed to higher levels of self-motivation in their chosen field of study and a well-developed capacity for independent learning.

Studies also indicate that parental involvement in a child's education improves education outcomes (Hill, N., & Taylor, L., 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

(ii) financial costs

The costs of home educating one's children may be substantial. For our family it has decreased the family income for the last six years, as one parent stays at home with the children to educate them. There is no government subsidy to assist with any of the costs of home education and there can be considerable outlays for resources, tutoring and activities. Our family contributes taxes to support the wider community and social and educational services. All our family education expenses for access to programs, equipment, classes, coaching, performances and excursions are borne by our immediate family.

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

My partner is a manager in the public sector with degrees in economics and public policy. I have held managerial and coordination roles in the public sector, and hold degrees in communications and sociology and have nearly completed an education (teaching) degree.

Our oldest child attended kindergarten for two terms at a local infants' school with a good reputation for early childhood education. He was distressed due to bullying by other students, and said he felt shamed by teachers for matters that were to do with his additional needs for physical and fine motor support. A psychologist thought that his distress impeded his ability to learn in a school environment and that he experienced periods of disassociation at school.

We considered different options for our son including sending him to a different school and alternative schools. The evidence base for home education indicated better educational and social outcomes (Barwegen et al, 2004; Blok, 2004; Cogan, 2010; Meighan, 1995; Martin-Chang, Gould & Meuse, 2011; Rudner, 1999; Saunders, 2006; Snyder, 2013; Hill & Taylor, 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006) and suited his emotional needs at the time.

Since he was significantly distressed attending school we decided to trial home educating him for a period of 6 months. At the end of that period we reviewed his progress and decided that home educating him was beneficial to him overall and that he showed marked development socially

and academically. Importantly home educating him reinvigorated his passionate interest in the world, instead of damping out his enthusiasm. He told us how he felt unable to ask questions in class.

(iv) extent of and reasons for unregistered home schoolers

We are registered home educators. NSW registration processes are cumbersome requiring material or programming for an individual student beyond that which would be asked of a teacher. The A.C.T. and Victorian models are preferable and allow for more adaptable programming to meet the education interests and needs of the child.

I know home educators who felt that the visiting Authorised Person or compliance officer from the Board of Studies (BoS) were over controlling and unfair in their application of home education guidelines.

Our direct experience with an Authorised Person has been positive as she has a broad knowledge of education approaches, having had a long career as a teacher and Principal, and is supportive of different educational programs and because she is mainly interested in our children's education interests and demonstrated abilities. In considering our registration she focuses on our children's development for example in literacy and writing over a period of time. She assesses their development through discussion with them and viewing their prior and current work. She has stated that they are developing extremely well and has encouraged us to continue with home education because our children are thriving socially, emotionally and academically. They are pursuing interests that may be deemed too difficult or complex for primary school aged children in a school setting but they are self-motivated and are capable of working at a higher level, for example in literacy, numeracy and science areas.

(v) characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children

We have three children aged 12, 8, and 4 years of age. The oldest child faced some early learning difficulties which were overcome through one-to-one tutoring by us (his parents), supported by a

larger network of extended family and professionals. He has fine motor issues due to a physical disability which we can accommodate in a home setting by providing him with suitable equipment. He is extraordinarily creative in the arts, producing sound tracks, animations, costumes and film designs, and in his story and script writing. He is working at or above grade level. It is his choice to be home educated and he can base this decision on prior experiences in a school setting and through interaction with friends who discuss their school experiences.

Our eight year old son is working well beyond his school-grade level and the AP agreed that he is a gifted student. We have accelerated his learning in mathematics and science.

We access open university courses and documentary series, research using online and library resources and frequently attend workshops and museums to extend our learning. We use a wide range of software programs, including online programs like Khan academy. Home education can be incredibly well adapted to a child's abilities and interests, and develop these without restriction to the maximum extent based on the child's rate of learning and passions.

Our over arching goals for home education are to teach our children about thinking and metacognition, problem solving and decision-making skills, to support their social development particularly through encouraging their oral and written communication skills and abilities, and to ensure that there is scope for creative pursuits in a wide field of endeavour. We want our children to be engaged and excited learning about the world and we do not want to undermine their self-esteem through unnecessary and detrimental ranking or shaming practices. We value their long term positive educational and academic outcomes, life-long learning, well-being and community participation.

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

Before deciding to home educate our children we reviewed research on long term social and educational outcomes for home-educated children. We felt that there was a sufficient evidence

base to indicate that our children would have good educational and social outcomes if they were home educated (see References).

Home education enables us to support our children's current interests, attend to their learning difficulties or above-age abilities, and tailor their education program in a way that would be unlikely in a school environment. They have access to adult support and tutoring throughout the day, and a much higher degree of one-to-one support than is possible in an ordinary classroom. They have access to a tailored education program which meets current educational interests and needs. We ensure a balance of hands-on indoor and outdoor activities and promote social and cooperative learning. Our week includes a number of group activities and time to socialise, such as through drama classes, chess, music, soccer and sports, workshops in science, group excursions to plays and music events, as well as unstructured time with other children of various ages for free play and socialisation. Our children have many options available to undertake further group activities in music, creative and fine arts, sports, science and technology. It would be possible to attend home education activities in every hour of the day and every day of the week since there are so many group activities arranged by home-educating parents in Sydney. Our children enjoy the following benefits of home education; a less stressful and relatively peaceful learning environment, high degree of parental and adult mentoring, guidance and tutoring to help them develop skills and knowledge, time to pursue specific interests and therefore to become more self-motivated and independent learners (which I think ultimately will lead to them engaging in higher education studies and employment in a field that is suited to their interests and abilities), a flexible learning program which is adapted to suit their needs and goals and can accommodate a new research interest or desire to engage in a specific learning activity immediately.

(c) Regulatory framework for home schooling.

Many home educators have lost trust in the Board of Studies handling of policy and guideline changes in home education and are concerned about the increasing restrictions on educational choices. There is an apparently increasing focus by the BoS on regulation and monitoring and loss of emphasis on student needs and educational outcomes. Management of home education may represent a conflict of interest for the Board of Studies, as their foremost purpose is to propagate and promulgate NSW curriculum and its regulation, not to support alternative education curriculums.

Longer term change will depend on the outcomes of any review, but would need to respond to the following current inconsistencies and maladministration of the system:

. The Board of Studies (the Board) is role-conflicted because its function is to develop and promulgate the curriculum, but also manages family-based 'home' education. A key strength of family-based education is the flexibility of content delivery to students, with inherent and ongoing parental investment and monitoring of progress towards goals. The Board does not represent the interests of family based and home educators. The Board's primary goal is to implement its syllabus. It focuses almost exclusively on compliance and regulation and does not provide support to parent educators. The views of alternative education and home education are not represented within the current Board. The views of home educators are not represented, nor have they been sought during the development of guidelines. This is a major issue. We need a specialist, independent body with representation from alternative educationalists, home educators to oversee family based education in NSW. Failing this, at a minimum the inclusion of persons with extensive home education experience and alternative education on the Board is required immediately to meet standard government administrative practice in relation to representation of stakeholder interests.

The role of the Authorised Persons (APs) is part of NSW Government Service Delivery and to deliver the service effectively it is essential that these personnel have strong educational backgrounds with understanding, knowledge and skills as educators. It is also essential that they possess knowledge of current research and anecdotal evidence of alternative educational methods and also a deep understanding of the diverse range of effective home education practices being implemented in contemporary home education. The role of the Authorised Persons should encompass a support, assessment and information sharing role for home educating families and the 'Family Based Education Community'. The Authorised Persons should add value to the life of the Family Based Education Community through contact with individual families and on occasions directly with the 'Community'. The role should not be one of a Regulator and a Compliance Officer whose primary purpose is to enforce rigid and restrictive policy that is both practically and educationally unsound for the individual needs of children in Family Based Education. This approach can result in the undermining of progressive, innovative learning programs that are flexible and individualised to meet the interests and needs of children.

. Better outcomes are more likely if family educators feel a sense of ownership of any guidelines. Guidelines that provide the flexibility to deliver customised education but include agreed steps for negotiating and supporting family educators who risk not achieving the minimum learning objectives taken as a whole and applied democratically, taking into account cultural diversity, as the Victorian Guidelines suggest. Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory's and Tasmania's models for home education are implemented in a progressive, supportive manner that complements the states' wishes to ensure good educational outcomes for children, through supporting families and their children to achieve their educational aims.

When a longer term perspective is taken the costs of badly designed, compliance focussed policy in this field outweighs the benefits. My family would prefer to have a system that aligns more closely with the policy and practice of Victoria, the A.C.T. and Tasmania.

(d) Support issues for home schooling families and barriers to accessing support

Home educators do not currently have access to publically funded educational support services which are currently available to those in the school system such as access to the hospital school, travel passes, part-time schooling, school libraries, chemistry laboratories, extracurricular activities run by schools such as language classes, dance, sports, music and orchestra etc. These services and opportunities and access to TAFE courses ought to be available to home educated students.

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

My family, and many other home educators I have spoke to directly would prefer that an Independent body is set up to oversee home and family education (which includes representation from the home education sector and alternative educators). This independent body would be directly responsible to the Minister of Education and not administered through the Board of Studies.

(f) Any other related matter.

We have significant concerns with the management and regulation of home education by the Board of Studies (BoS), and see a strong need for a new independent body to oversee home education in NSW.

On the 26 August 2013 the New South Wales Board of Studies (BoS) issued new guidelines regarding 'home' education. These guidelines were published without BoS seeking participation from the 'home' and the family-based education community, or peak bodies such as the Sydney

Home Education Network or the Home Education Association. The guidelines contained significant and negative changes which restricted the ability of many families to fully support their children's education, needs and interests. The new guidelines were compliance and monitoring focussed, inhibited our movement and travel by focussing on teaching and learning undertaken in the home, which effectively narrows the scope of curriculum, activities, socialisation and choices as many family educators engage in educational activities outside the home.

Due to opposition and significant concerns with the guidelines the BoS published a 'Question and Answer page' on their website on 12 September 2013.

<http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/parents/home-schooling-info-qa.html>). The 'Question and Answer' section did not allay concerns. It did not discuss how the guidelines unlawfully impeded on our freedom to travel and to flexibly adapt learning activities for our children as needed without undue, unfair, cumbersome intervention and approval processes.

The guidelines were written with the form and function of a compliance document and restrict parental rights and responsibilities to educate their children. The guidelines provide unnecessary and undue privilege to compliance officers monitoring our educational programs. This is irresponsible given that the thrust of their role is not education but compliance, and that they have only a faint knowledge of our children's educational needs and aspirations.

Many families are concerned that as Authorised Persons and compliance officers consider individual applications under the light of such guidelines, the guidelines can be used to constrict and efface our parental rights and responsibilities to educate our children, and in effect may be used to the detriment of our children's learning outcomes and engagement in learning.

The BoS did not contact registered home educators ahead of publication, aside from letting the Home Education Association (HEA) preview an earlier version shortly before release. The HEA was told not to consult with their members and that it was confidential. The HEA also noted

that many changes were included post-meeting, changes which further restricted our ability to provide a high-quality education to our children. The guidelines were poorly conceived as statements within the document contradicted other stated purposes of the Department of Education and their own syllabuses. BoS have all registered home educators' addresses and contact details. The absence of genuine consultation is poor policy practice.

I alongside many other home educators requested the immediate recall of these inappropriate guidelines. They undermined good educational outcomes for many children and families, and infringed on parental rights to provide an education for their children. They also infringed upon our freedom of movement.

It is hoped that this inquiry will review legislation pertaining to 'home' education, to ensure that the legislation enables parents to provide the best education possible for our children.

Any guidelines and policy should uphold the *UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child*, as signed by the Australian Government, which entered into force on 2 September 1990. Principle seven states:

Principle 7

The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgement, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society.

The best interests of the child shall be the guiding principle of those responsible for his education and guidance; **that responsibility lies in the first place with his parents.**

The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purposes as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.”

Towards a world’s best practice system for NSW

Home education is not a threat to the education system but part of it, and has the potential to improve educational outcomes. NSW can’t have a world’s best education system without a world’s best approach to family based education.

Objectives of the administration of family based education in NSW must include flexibility of the education system to cater for needs of the child, the learning interests of the child, improved learning outcomes, cost efficient administration, innovation and risk management, and culturally appropriate service delivery by the NSW Government.

Several short term and long term changes need to be made to enable a fairer, better system for NSW.

Short term changes include:

- . The announcement of a review of family-based ‘home’ education in NSW that meets minimum standards for public consultation, including the participation of key stakeholders, and is based on a consideration of evidence and conducted by educators, including people recognised as world leaders in alternative education.

- . The complete withdrawal of the 2013 Board of Studies NSW (BoS) issued Guidelines. Any new guidelines should only be developed in accordance with principles of good government which in this domain relies on the participation and thorough consultations with family-based educators, and on the basis of evidence. Such guidelines need to be within the parameters of the Education Act 1990 and allow for the flexibility of approach articulated by parliamentarians and legislators. Our intention is that the legislation is also reviewed to broaden the definition of

home education and enable 'parental' rights responsibility for a broad range of decisions in relation to their children's education. The Act's provisions are broader than the 2013 guidelines indicate. The intent of the legislators of the Education Act 1990 has been dramatically overreached by bureaucrats. For some time BoS has overreached the intent of the legislators, in a number of cases by applying inconsistent, unfair and detrimental restrictions to family-based educators, as noted through countless individual anecdotes.

. The definition of 'home education' is problematic and needs to be revised. The current definition under the Education Act 1990 Sect 3 is:

"home schooling" means [schooling](#) in the child's home, other than [distance education](#) provided by a government or [registered non-government school](#) in which the child is enrolled.

Although a large proportion of education occurs within the home, many 'home' educated children learn cooperatively in groups outside the 'home', and learn through interaction with their community, and engage with learning experiences outside the home. A broader definition of 'home education' developed through broad consultation needs to be developed. For example one might consider the term 'family based education':

'Family based education' means an education that is provided by the family of the child/ren and includes activities within and outside the home, other than distance education provided by a government or registered non-government school in which the child is enrolled.

The learning can take place within the course of family life and be consistent with the pattern of day to day life in a family, including but not restricted to: excursions from the home, engagement with the community, cooperative educational experiences and periods of travel, without restriction. Currently many family based educator's timetable cooperative learning activities outside the home throughout the week.

Many families currently engage instructors, tutors and coaches, or attend workshops and other learning activities, as part of their learning program and are required to attend such educational activities to fulfil other elements of the syllabus. It is discriminatory against family educators and their children for them to be required to be exclusively in the home as it infringes on their freedom of movement, hinders a learning program which includes group and cooperative learning, or the engagement of specialists, workshops, activities and facilities outside the home.

Innovative educators

‘Home’ educators are at the forefront of innovative educational practice. As Sir Ken Robinson, an outstanding and world-recognised educationalist has said schooling often undermines our children’s creative intelligence.

“My contention is that creativity now is as important in education as literacy... I believe our only hope for the future is to adopt a new conception of human ecology, one in which we start to reconstitute our conception of the richness of human capacity. Our education system has mined our minds in the way that we strip-mine the earth, for a particular commodity, and for the future, it won’t serve us. We have to rethink the fundamental principles on which we’re educating our children... What TED celebrates is the gift of the human imagination. We have to be careful now that we use this gift wisely, and that we avert some of the scenarios that we’ve talked about. And the only way we’ll do it is by seeing our creative capacities for the richness they are, and seeing our children for the hope that they are. And our task is to educate their whole being, so they can face this future — by the way, we may not see this future, but they will.”

Sir Ken Robinson, recorded February 2006 in Monterey, CA. Duration: 20:02

http://blog.ted.com/2006/06/27/sir_ken_robinso/

Supporting such creative intelligence is the hallmark of many family-based education approaches and outcomes. Children often demonstrate precocious interests and passions in the world

around them at a young age and are self-propelled into deeper discovery processes. An engaged educator will support this learning. Rather than BoS aiming to coerce home-educating families to implement a formula designed for schools with classrooms of twenty plus children, they could learn from our learning experiences and rethink how natural learning, flexible delivery and inquiry-led learning may reinvent schools to foster children's enthusiasm for learning and their creative intelligence.

Family-based educators need to have the freedom to deliver individualised and tailored educational programs. We believe that an education which supports our children's needs to be creative, inquisitive, thoughtful and communicative will support our children's growth and the development of vital problem solving skills so that they may be innovators and contributors to NSW communities and economies.

Best practice home education

A positive scenario I would like to see occur, for engagement between APs and 'home' educating families is one in which there is support and trust and a willingness to share enthusiasm for individualised learning tailored to meet the needs of each child. If upon seeing samples of work, and of discussing a child's development and abilities an appropriately experienced educator, AP, is concerned that a child is not developing according to their ability or is too restricted in their program, which may rarely be the case, then the educationalist can discuss ways of supporting a parent-educator to foster approaches and use resources that will spur on their child's development.

Samples of children's work ought to be sufficient evidence that a child is developing skills and knowledge in different subject areas. BoS currently requires every home educating family to undertake a ridiculous amount of additional paperwork, an amount which many employed school teachers consider is above and beyond what is expected of paid teachers programming or reporting on individual students. Family educators gain no resources or financial payments or

subsidies commensurate with that of a child placed in school, nor are we paid a teacher's income to educate our children or to undertake this reporting.

The Coalition governments previous stance on this issue

The entire attitude and tone of the current guidelines has a punitive and untrusting tenor. Why has this been developed? What notions of education support such intrusion and restriction? What notions of parental responsibility and rights to educate and rear their children support such intrusion and restriction? How can a liberal government support such intrusion and restriction, when in parliament it has defended those principles of parental responsibility, rights and freedom to make choices about how parents rear and educate their children? In 1998 the Coalition proudly defended the protection of parental choices to educate their children in parliamentary speeches (Hansard - <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA19981020038?Open&refNavID=>). Similarly, at that time, the Board of Studies (BoS) sneakily introduced changes to regulations for home schooling without consulting home educators, denying in the same period that they had made any changes. There is a remarkable similarity in the way that the current changes have been implemented and policy change denied. This is not the hallmark of good governance. In 1998 the Coalition was scathing of the way in which changes were implemented and a commitment was made:

“...as I have said to home schoolers and now put on the record of the Parliament, when the coalition is in government it will consult with home schoolers on guidelines, which will probably be given force by regulation, that reflect the new character of home schooling. The coalition will not introduce guidelines or regulations which try to impose a school-based model on home schooling, which is a different form of education. The coalition does not have a preconception that home schooling must be like the education received in a State school for it to be valid.”

We have separate child protection legislation. This is a distinct and important issue. Certainly all children deserve a childhood free of abuse, and one in which they can develop their minds and bodies to their potential. The vast majority of parents wish this for their children. Placing such restrictions on our movement, on our ability to flexibly adapt to the needs of our children, to undermine our rights and responsibilities as parent educators is something analogous to putting the whole of society on probation. Such a degree of monitoring is ridiculous, cumbersome and unwarranted in the extreme. It also creates a society without trust. Favour the vast majority of parents with trust in their desire to be good parents, to support their children's development so that they can enter fully as citizens of our community.

Families who approach education from a child-inquiry based and natural learning approach have chosen an alternative education as they feel it will support their children's motivation to learn through a wide range of materials. Through fostering their children's engagement in learning and adopting a dialectical approach, which many parent-educators naturally apply, their children will acquire skills in research, critical thinking and communication and support their creative intelligence.

For the majority of home educated children being in a large classroom and taught in a broadcast fashion is a less positive experience than small group or family based learning, indeed for some it is detrimental emotionally, socially and academically.

Family based educators need supportive legislation and to be able to seek assistance as they require from educationalists who possess a profound understanding of individualised learning and alternative education, and who can help them work towards the high aspirations they have for their children's learning outcomes. If we work together we can build a world's best practice family based education system in NSW.

Yours sincerely,

Sophia Platthy

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