

**Submission  
No 143**

## **INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING**

**Name:** Ms Colleen Strange

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To:

The Director

Select Committee on Home Schooling

Parliament House

Macquarie St

Sydney NSW 2000

From:

Colleen Strange

8<sup>th</sup> August 2014

Re: LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

Thank you for the opportunity to communicate my opinions, observances and experience in home schooling my own children. I have also been active in various home schooling community groups (1985 – 2008) and involved in the lobbying of the NSW State Government when John Aquilina was the Minister for Education and Training. I financed the establishment of the Home Education Association in 2001 and was the Secretary for its first seven years and was involved in counselling and providing resources for new and inquiring home schoolers.

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

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

I understand this point refers to the government requirements on home schooling in other jurisdictions. I haven't done sufficient research to comment on this and have only ever lived in NSW so I cannot compare them.

**(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,**

I started homeschooling in 1986 when I met another homeschooler by chance and found out that it was possible. I started with a 'school at home' approach because that was all I knew to do. Then I found a community of home educating families who introduced me to a more natural approach. It was truly liberating to learn that it was OK not to be in control of my children's learning all the time. To teach them what and when they were ready to learn, to take their lead and take advantage of whatever was happening in current affairs or in the local community meant that I wasn't struggling and imposing an unnatural and inappropriate course of study on my boys. It made for a much more relaxed and happy home.

Home schooling was a fabulous success and I don't regret a day of it except for the counter-productive 'school at home' stuff I did to begin with. I have three boys and they were all home schooled. They are now 24, 28 and 30 and are either employed (and paying taxes) or still at University (in Germany so it's not costing you anything). My eldest is working as a surveyor and studying part-time to gain full qualifications, my second son is working in IT, and my youngest is studying music in Germany.

My eldest went to school for high school. He was very keen to go. His level of education was well in advance when he started at the local High School and he had no trouble fitting in socially. He is quite gregarious and one of his teachers commented to me that she noticed in the playground that he would spend time with different cliques and racial groups and he seemed to 'move easily between them'. She thought this was unusual. The only difficulty he had in adapting to school life was that he had a habit of whistling while he worked which he had to avoid and on one occasion he called a teacher, "Mum". I am not exaggerating when I say that his experience at school was disastrous. His grades gradually dropped as he lost

interest and we eventually moved him to a Year 11/12 high school to gain his HSC. He finished school, like so many other young men, not have any direction. He wasted a lot of time working himself out, including doing a Social Science degree, which he chose because of the subjects he performed well in at school. He is now settled working with a surveying company and is studying Surveying part-time.

My second child was, and is, dyslexic. He has an enquiring mind and developed great skills with computers. At 15 years of age he was offered a part time job in one of Sydney's leading Universities on the IT help desk. He seemed to have no difficulty adjusting to employment and his supervisors must have been very pleased with him. The next year he applied for one of two full time positions and was successful against many other people, all of whom had qualifications, having completed degrees in IT. He has been trained through his work without any issues with his dyslexia. He has been working there since he started and has developed his own software business in his spare time. He is very active in the local community and donates a lot of time to his church activities.

My youngest son, who is also very outgoing, wanted to go to high school. However, our experience with our eldest was quite negative so we made a deal with him that we would make sure he got out at least three days a week to spend time with other home schoolers. I am so pleased we continued to home school him. One great advantage was that he had fantastic opportunities to travel with his music teacher to Europe and the USA which couldn't have happened without the flexibility of home schooling. His tutor saw potential in him as a great teacher (which we could see of course by the way he interacted with other children older and younger than himself) and gave him work from an early age teaching younger children and leading small ensembles. When he was 16 he was 'elected' band leader of a youth big band that he was involved with. He was able to focus on his music and teaching because he wasn't bound to a school timeframe or curriculum. He is currently continuing his studies in Jazz trumpet at a University in Germany.

My boys are productive men who are and will be great assets to their local communities. I am convinced that my middle and youngest boys have achieved so well because they were home schooled. From their childhood they were mature, confident, gregarious and respectful young people. I attribute that to home schooling because they learnt by example

from the adults around them, how to treat other people, rather than their peers. They had, and still have, friends within home schooling groups, from the neighbourhood, local sport clubs, church and family.

**(ii) financial costs,**

I was not able to return to work until after my boys progressed to tertiary education so this was a huge financial cost to our family. The lack of government funding represents an appalling unfairness to home schooled children. We became quite resourceful in obtaining opportunities for our children and often pooled our expertise with the home schooling community to source our 'experts' who could provide educational services. However, there is no doubt that the quality of our boys education would have been improved if there were funds for more services and learning materials.

One example is the RoboCup competition. This is a Robotics competition for schools which uses Lego technology. We were fortunate in knowing a wealthy family from the USA who financed a home schooling team. Our youngest boy was included in the team and after two years of entering the competition they won the state and came second in the national competition. The pity is that the materials are so very expensive and therefore totally out of reach of most home schooling families to access them. If a child shows talent in robotics and computing they should have access to this great learning tool.

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

Home schooling for us was a lifestyle choice to begin with. While I was looking into schools for our eldest child I discovered home schooling and never looked back. Both of us were schooled - Mum in the State system and Dad was a third generation Shore boy and we were extremely successful in terms of proceeding to Architecture at UNSW. We do have good memories of standout teachers and learning experiences we enjoyed, on the whole, we both have negative experiences that dominate and neither of us would say that we enjoyed school. The biggest factor in our experiences is forced socialisation and both of us resent different aspects of it.

We were drawn to home schooling as a positive experience that we could give our children. We wanted to protect our children from the negative aspects of schooling.

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

I started registering for home schooling but discontinued. I started under what I thought at the time was a draconian system but much better than the current system. I was keen to be legal as most new home schooling families are, we needed as much encouragement as we could get and being 'legal' was some sort of assurance to friends and family.

I endured the 'inspection' of my house and 'program' for years but I resented the presumption that I needed to prove that I wasn't abusing my children by not providing them with an adequate education. The State liaison officers may be 'experts' in mass education in the school system but had no appreciation that educating your own children was different.

The curriculum was difficult to understand and appropriate to my needs. I knew intuitively that my boys were learning to the best of their abilities and in accord with their interests but I didn't understand the lingo for 'assessing learning outcomes' so I found it hard to prepare for the AP visit. I had to create works of fiction to meet the registration requirements. It was very stressful. In fact I would be almost physically sick with worry with the expectation of having to justify myself prior to each inspection. It definitely had a Big Brother impact on me and I declared a week's holiday after each inspection.

We stopped registering after some years. The registration system did not assist in the education we gave our boys. If it did we would have registered because we believe in abiding by the laws of the land.

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

I have mentioned that my middle son was both dyslexic and very bright. I need to clarify that we did not ignore my sons reading difficulties. At great expense we employed the services of three different Education Psychologist (and their various theories and therapies) and a Remedial Reading teacher. Eventually we realized that it was not only barely effective but also counterproductive to concentrate on a child's weaknesses. We should be focusing on talents and providing learning experiences that would prepare him better for adulthood. He has learnt to cope very well with his dyslexia despite all the trouble we took to cure him of it.

It isn't difficult to imagine that if he had been in the school system he would be damaged and that is primarily because he would have been one in a class of many. He would have not received the individual attention he needed (that all children need). The emphasis would have been on getting him reading, which would have been a cause of frustration and embarrassment for him, rather than providing him with positive learning experiences that he could excel at.

While I was a contact person for the Home Education Association I counselled many parents who were desperately seeking a solution for their child's problems in school. Generally it was one of two issues. The major reason for considering home schooling is that their child was being bullied and the other reason was that their child wasn't average and their learning needs were not being met. Either they were falling behind the other kids or in their school work or they were bright and not being challenged.

One example is of a boy who fell behind quickly at school and his mother was year after year pacified by teachers with comments like, 'You shouldn't be concerned. He's a lovely boy.' After several years of her son continuing to fall further and further behind and becoming socially withdrawn and suffering emotionally, she paid for IQ testing and an expert remedial teacher to draw up a recommended program of learning that she could take to the school to assist them in educating her son. However the school ignored the report and the recommended program completely and continued teaching him at levels up to 3 grades above him. Learning a second language was added to his school year and he was required to attend even though he was barely able to read and write English. His educational needs were clearly not a priority in the school system. When it dawned on this boy's mother that the report she had paid for did not tell her anything that she didn't already know, she committed herself to homeschooling all her children. She realised that she was capable of knowing what her children need and then it was just a matter of equipping herself to deliver a good education. It is particularly galling to her that when her home schooling program is inspected she has to prove to the State that she can be trusted to educate her own children when her son had been educationally abused by the school system.

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

When I started home schooling a close friend was living overseas for a few years and was using Distance Education material to school her children. It is a very 'pencil and paper' approach to imparting information Distance Education consumed a lot of their time and they were rarely able to complete all the paperwork required for each unit. Mother was criticized if all the work set by the schedule wasn't returned completed and it became a source of friction between her and her child. She was a teacher herself and knew that the work her child was expected to achieve was nothing like the school experience. She eventually gave it up to start home schooling. It gave her the freedom to take advantage of any learning opportunities that arose in the community and from her daughter's own interest. They could use their home and community: the kitchen, garden, pets, shopping, parks, library, local people, friends and relatives etc. as a resource for learning. Learning was relevant and real and not book based and separate. It was natural.

Home schooling is called 'home' schooling to distinguish it from school but most of us prefer the term 'home based education' because it is nothing like school or Distance Education. Distance Education assumes parents have no intuition or ability to teach their own children and it is based on the idea that trained adults must be in control of learning otherwise children won't learn what they need to.

There has been some comparative research done on school and home schooling but the Board of Studies and most people in the education 'profession' are dismissive because it indicates that home based learning is comparable in a few areas and far superior in most. They seem to believe in the school system with religious fanaticism and will not consider the research.

Children's education used to be under the authority of parents, who understood their responsibilities, but now school education has grown into a dominant part of every community. Schooling is a huge industry providing work for a significant number of people, public and private, and class room learning has a huge profession that has developed around it – teachers, teachers of teachers, inspectors of teachers, curriculum development and government oversight, and of course the almost routine changes in curriculum and syllabuses that produce the necessity for new and improved learning materials and teaching aides, not to mention all the associated spin offs of extra tutoring, special programming, and



of course the huge buildings and facilities to keep children in during school hours. I realize it is a big part of our economy. Schooling is big and has a lot of 'muscle'.

The State has written into law that it is now responsible for the education of 'its children' and that parents are therefore answerable to them if they choose to operate outside the school system. I appreciate that the State is just responding to community feeling but it also has a responsibility to individual families who choose to operate outside the norm.

Homeschoolers find it deeply offensive that the State makes them responsible to the State for their own children. This is more so when the State does such a poor job of educating many of the children in its care.

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

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

I was part of a delegation of home schooling parents who met with Steven O'Doherty when he was the Shadow Minister for Education. The Minister of Education and Training at that time was John Aquilina and he tried to introduce a change in the Education Act relating to home schooling. He refused to meet any home schoolers. Mr O'Doherty agreed that home schooling was a 'liberal' idea and that the rights of individuals to control their own lives and the lives of their children is fundamentally in line with Liberal philosophy. He advised us at the time that the only way we could get out from under State control would be through self-regulation. This sounds helpful but the reality is that home schoolers are fiercely independent and if of any home schooling organization were to attempt to set up a system of registration parallel to the State there would be so much opposition from within that it would be quite destructive.

I believe there are two innovations that should be brought into action that ought rightly to be done and would also entice unregistered home schoolers toward registration. One is by making it financially worthwhile. This must be done with close consultation with the homeschooling community so that the priorities of home schooling families are targeted. The other is that the registration process itself must be independent of the school registering body/s because learning outside the school system is very different.

## **(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons,**

Not so long ago the Board of Studies arranged for new APs to be educated, about what home schooling is and how it works, by a representative from the Home Education Association but I understand that this was stopped. I wouldn't be surprised if they found they couldn't marry the two systems – another reason why the registration process for home schooling must be independent of the school registering body. We need people who are sympathetic and who know home schooling to be responsible for the registration requirements and process.

There should also be relevant training available to home schooling parents similar to professional development courses. However, this must not be teacher training. Courses in the registration process itself and its requirements may be helpful. I found the psychology of learning particularly helpful in appreciating what was happening naturally in my boys learning.

## **(iii) adherence to delivery of the New South Wales Syllabuses,**

Children are like 'learning machines'. They are voracious in the pursuit of knowledge that is relevant to them and that interests them, and most things do, maybe only for a short time, maybe years. Learning was also sporadic. There were periods when they don't seem to make ground and then their learning takes off. In home schooling we make allowance for the way children learn naturally and take advantage of their unique interests and learning styles. I tried to let my boys lead the learning process. It was my job to facilitate their learning by providing experiences, materials, information that would assist them. We called this Natural Learning. The most effective way of closing down natural curiosity is to try too much to control it and that is what strict adherence to a syllabus does.

I found the State syllabus useful in terms of giving me ideas about what to try with the boys but if they weren't interested it was counterproductive to push it.

We have to put the school Syllabus into perspective and realize that it is making a compulsory learning schedule based on the observed learning of average children. Natural learning is coming from the other end.

'Retrospective Planning' is something that most home schooling parents have done, either in part or whole, in the past to meet the State requirements for programming their children's learning for the purpose of registration. Basically it was converting a diary of what their children had done and achieved and presenting it as a 'program of learning' that would normally be done beforehand. I found this worked for me because it stopped my dominating learning.

It is imperative that home schooling parents be trusted to provide their children with a good education and to be respected for their choice. Home schooling parents sacrifice a great deal to educate their child and they are very happy to make those sacrifices. They want to see their children achieve great things as adults and are immensely proud of their achievements just like regular school parents. They should not be viewed with suspicion and it should be made as easy as possible for them to meet the State registration process.

I understand that the State is obliged by community expectations to 'regulate' the education of home schooled children. I believe the least stressful way for home schoolers would be for them to submit Retrospective Planning and the task of APs trained and sympathetic to home schooling could assess it with regard to the age, intelligence and talents of the child. If the AP thought that the child was deprived of a reasonable education they could have power to intervene in some way. However, the Syllabus, should only be a guide or a tool to be used at the parent's discretion.

**(iv) potential benefits or impediments to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing,**

This point seems to be a major argument against home schooling after the quality of education in home schooling has been discussed. I understand this point to be related to emotional, social, physical etc. wellbeing and not abuse related to education. It is not to address the issues of crushing a child's love of learning and natural confidence in their own abilities. I don't think it is related to protecting children from accidental injury.

Firstly, I have a right to be defensive. It should be pointed out that some children are treated very badly in school. Most of us have bad experiences of being bullied by other children and teachers and it would be foolish to believe that it has changed. In fact, bullying

is a significant problem in schools and is one of the major reasons why people take their children out of school to home school them.

If bullying wasn't a problem then schools wouldn't be running prevention programs. When children are forced to associate with children they don't like or don't understand, day after day and year after year, constantly being tested and compared, it is not surprising that they react badly. When teachers are under stress, for whatever reason, they can manage children in hurtful ways, and they choose to overlook evident bullying amongst children.

I was invited to attend a symposium on bullying in schools run by Channel 7 (I think). I was the only home schooling parent in 200 delegates who were mostly school teachers but there were several teenagers who participated. I believe the aim was to share ideas to solve the problem but basically the teachers were there to brag about the successful program they'd introduced in their wonderful school. I was appalled that the general consensus amongst teachers was that it was part of growing up and children should be shown how to turn it into a positive experience - in other words that 'bullying builds character'. There was also general consensus that there wasn't much that schools could do because this behaviour was part of their 'home life' - lots of tut tutting. When teachers get together they have an 'us and them' mentality.

One of the students suggested that teachers could be bullies too and there was nothing she could do about it. She was soundly supported by the other students in the hall but only a few teachers were sympathetic. Their views were dismissed by a loud section as not relevant to the discussion and that, "there were systems in place to take care of that." We moved quickly off the issue.

It wasn't so long ago that corporal punishment was used in schools. Was the impetus to have it removed from teachers or parents? As a parent who, of that time, used to smack my children I wish I could turn back the clock and do it right. I have apologized to my boys for things that they don't even remember. However, I doubt that any teacher who has smacked a child has any regrets or even has spared a second thought for that child, because they don't love them like a parent does. If you ask any teacher they will tell you how stressful their job is and I expect that bullying by teachers is still happening. The difference is that it is not physical.

It is interesting that the institution that has been so guilty in the abuse of children is now their 'guardian'.

However, the focus of this point is on a perceived possibility that a child who is not at school is not monitored (by the guardians mentioned above) and therefore could be vulnerable to abuse by parents who home school. I understand that it is an issue and not because there is evidence that it happens but because it 'could' happen.

I believe this is a serious issue for the State and for the reputation of home schooling. The problem is that the general community understanding of home schooling is poor and because we are a minority and not understood they are very suspicious. If one instance of abuse is leveled at a home schooling parent, regardless of the facts, the media will run a negative story. Home schooling will be smeared and the State will be under pressure to increase regulation.

Perhaps the only solution to this is to make the registration of home schooling as enticing as possible and to provide, and open up, opportunities for home schooled children to be involved in community and paraschool programs.

I understand that the current Board of Studies requirements are actually forcing home schooling into the home because they do not consider learning that happens outside the home to be valid. That would certainly result in home schooled children spending less time in the community and therefore it would be counterproductive if you wanted some sort of community monitoring.

**(vi) appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved,**

I finished home schooling several years ago and am not familiar with the details of the current regulations.

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

It is a matter of equal opportunity for home schooled children that they should be able to access programs that run parallel to school. This would certainly be a great support when home schooling teenagers or children with disabilities.

I found an innovative program for schooled children which I enrolled my middle son in which was fantastic. The idea was to keep boys, who were in danger of leaving school early, in the school system by having them attend an engineering workshop two days a week. It was a trial program and it only lasted a term. It was a taste of apprenticeship and the boys were taught how to operate metal working machines etc. It was a great opportunity for my son and he enjoyed it immensely. I presume it is defunct now because these poor boys have to be educated against their will now until they are 18 - a huge shame.

It would be particularly attractive to families in rural communities and areas where there are few home schoolers, to have access to programs in schools. City homeschoolers can meet to organize a variety of shared programs such as drama, orchestra, etc. but this is impossible for rural homeschoolers. However, there is a lot of opposition to home schooling amongst people who work in the system so I expect it will be resisted. One school administrators told me, "if you choose to go outside the system you shouldn't be supported by the system." I was told by another administrator, "it is an insurance issue to have people on the school grounds who aren't enrolled." I organized the insurance for the Home Education Association and I know that it wouldn't have been an issue but there was no point arguing - it was a more pleasant way of saying, "No".

Any contact with organizations in the community would also entice families toward registration.

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

It makes me angry that our community presumes that the education of children is an area for 'experts' who can be in their early twenties with no children of their own and who may not even like children. They have obtained specialist knowledge through four or five years of study and a few months of work experience. It assumes that parents cannot know or learn to educate their own children unless they do it under the instruction and supervision of the State.

The Board of Studies might know how to 'school' children but it does not know how to educate children in the home environment. The trouble is that it doesn't care to know. It

seems that since home educated children represent such a small percentage that it doesn't warrant any further trouble to understand and accommodate them.

We need a separate registering body.

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

I hope I have expressed my absolute conviction that home schooling works and it is a far superior alternative to school education. It is the single most worthwhile investment we made as a family. I have no regrets that we chose to give up a second income and invest that time into raising our boys. I do regret sending our eldest to school. It set him back greatly, both socially and to his career development.

I truly believe that children learn social skills from their families and home schooling gives children a greater opportunity to learn those skills in a protected environment. Schooled children learn how to 'survive' and adapt to an unnatural social construct.

School is about constantly comparing yourself with the other kids and despite any school program to disguise it, every child knows where they are on the scale of 'dumbness'.

Children can be very cruel to each other. My boys did not have to endure that.

So much in school depends on your ability to get the information you need through reading and children who can't read suffer. Teachers also don't have the time to read to individual children. My boys had my attention and care and were well served by it.

**Conclusions**

I presume the issue of regulating home schooling has come again for consideration because of the desire for the government to cut costs and, because the regulating authority can only see how much it is costing to regulate home schooling, they are keen to discourage it. Let me tell you sincerely that home schooling works! And because it works so well you should not discourage it.

The more you impose on parents, and make it more difficult to 'register' themselves with the State, you will only succeed in driving good people, who are educating their children

well, to go 'underground'. You will drive good people to break the 'letter of the law' and that is bad government.

I started the Home Education Association in 2001 after a similar political battle we had with the NSW Government at that time. One of the chief intentions of forming the Association was to promote home schooling and to do that we needed to be as visible as possible. Then the internet really took off and we haven't looked back. Home schooling is growing because it is meeting a significant and extremely important role in the community and it should be encouraged and supported.

Thank you for your consideration of my views,

Colleen Strange