

Submission
No 260

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 8/08/2014

Partially Confidential

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

SUMMARY

I initially chose to home educate as my third child had special needs. I then home educated the rest of my children as I realised that home education is a wonderful way to provide a high quality academic and social education for a child.

For my son, the decision to home educate him changed his future. The tailored programme that I was able to provide gave him the academic skills that are essential in life. We began home educating him at the age of 7 and he is now 16 and on his way to receiving an offer to study Engineering at the University of New South Wales.

It is imperative that home education be seen to be a real option for all parents, especially for those with children with special needs. It is essential that the registration process be transparent and focus on learning rather than paperwork. Support also needs to be provided to home educators.

Home education should be administered by its own independent Board which reports directly to the Minister of Education. This Board should also have a support function. This is essential because there are significant differences in the way that home educators deliver a quality education when compared to how a traditional school delivers an education programme. The unique nature of home education needs to be acknowledged and respected by the members of this independent Board.

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

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

Home education has always been a part of the education sector in Australia. Home education is regulated by the individual states and as such there are significant variations between the states.

The current registration process in New South Wales requires the parent to spend significant amounts of time on documentation. This additional documentation that came about as a direct result of the introduction of the 2013 Information Package by BoSTES has not increased learning outcomes. A better process would be that used in Victoria or Tasmania. Furthermore, part time schooling should also be an option as in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

1 (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

Child B

Child B completed Years 3 and 4 at home. During Year 4 he sat the Opportunity Class Placement Test and was offered a place in an Opportunity Class. Opportunity classes are for academically gifted and talented students. My child was not tutored for this examination. Upon commencing the class, his teaching found him to be an enthusiastic and happy learner. There were no problems with transitioning from the home educating environment to a traditional school environment. I can confidently say that home education allowed him to grow both socially and academically.

Child C

Child C has experienced many positive outcomes as a direct result of home education. We began to home educate him at the beginning of Year 1 as he struggled to learn whilst in Kindergarten. These positive outcomes include

- Being able to learn at his own pace
- Being taught through his dominant learning style
- Allowed adequate time to learn new concepts
- Maintaining a love for learning
- Confidence and a healthy self esteem

Child D

Child D completed Year 6 at home. She sat the Selective School Test in Year 6 and received a position in High School. High School is ranked as the 14th most difficult school to be offered a place in according to the results of the 2013 NAPLAN test, and is the 4th highest performing girls' school in Australia. She was not tutored for this examination.

The school provided a report at the end of term 1, Year 7 commenting on how the student has settled into the high school. My daughter's report states that Child D is "settled, well organised, engaged in her learning and happy. She has made friends and enjoys being with her group and meeting new friends". Clearly, she has experienced many positive outcomes as a direct result of home education.

Child D transitioned very well from home education to a traditional school. She is now in Year 8 and is a member of the Student Representative Council and the debating team.

Child E

Child E is 10 years old and has always been home educated. She, too, has experienced many positive outcomes as a direct result of home education. She is a confident and happy child who enjoys learning and meeting new people.

(ii) financial costs,

For me, the cost of home educating has three components:

- salary forgone by the parent in order to home educate
- time spent in planning and delivering a quality education.
- cost of resources, classes etc

Of these costs, the salary forgone is the greatest cost. The cost of resources and classes is similar to the fees and other charges that I pay for each of my children who attend public schools.

It should be noted that parents who choose to home educate their children save the government a significant amount of money on an annual basis. Whilst the government provides funding to those parents who choose a non-public school education for their child (ie, Catholic or independent schools), no such funding is available to home educated children.

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

Parents

I am a second generation migrant and my husband arrived in Australia at the age of 18. Both of us hold Bachelor degrees. I have been a home maker since the birth of my first child and my husband is a senior manager in a large Australian company. This is our 10th year of home education.

Child A

My eldest child began school at the age of five. He attended our local public school till the end of year 4 after which he received an offer to attend an Opportunity Class (gifted and talented class). From there, he attended a selective high school and is now studying commerce/law. Child A is an example of where a traditional school suits the personality and the learning style of the child. Such a child can succeed in a traditional school environment on both a social and academic level.

Child B

My second child also began school at the age of five at our local public school. However, we decided to take him out at the beginning of year 3 as we were commencing home education with his younger brother. This seemed like a good idea as Child B was subject to bullying in year 2 and the school was not addressing that issue properly. In Year 5, Child B received an offer for the Opportunity Class and later a selective high school. He will sit the HSC this year. For Child B, the two years of home education gave him the opportunity to take a step back from the negatives of school, to become resilient and then flourish in a traditional school system.

Child C

My third child had some challenges in life and needed speech and occupational therapy from a very young age. When he turned five I enrolled him in the same school as his older siblings. I had concerns about him as I knew that he would struggle with the academic side of school. It was at this point that a friend suggested home schooling. This was the first time I had heard of this concept and I dismissed it as an option.

Child C completed kindergarten which was not a positive experience for him at all. In hindsight, his teacher failed him in many ways. The thing that stands out the most clearly, ten years on, is the last day of kindergarten when I asked the teacher how I could help him during the holidays to catch up and be ready for year 1. The teacher showed me a large book in which she had written the date and the comment "Child C refused to read today." She had faithfully documented this every week for one and a half terms! Meanwhile, I was picking up Child C every day and asking the teacher how Child C was that day. This is a perfect example of how documentation became more important than learning or even communicating in a timely manner with the parent. The teacher suggested a very intense remedial schedule for Child C to do over the summer break. Looking at her ideas, it was evident that I was the one that was going to teach Child C to read. Thus, we decided to take Child C out of school and home educate him. Our initial plan was to do this for two years and then return to a traditional school.

From the onset, we had engaged a speech therapist to help Child C and she also administered standard tests in relation to reading and comprehension. At the end of kindergarten, Child C was significantly behind his peers. A year into our home educating journey, Child C was "average". Even when the remedial aspect of the speech therapy was finished we continued to have yearly reading and comprehension tests done. Child C's results continued to improve and one year, his speech therapist said that there was no need for further testing as Child C was now performing above his grade/age level. She added that she had never before seen a child move out of remedial. The fact that this was achieved by the time the child was ten was even more remarkable.

Child C was now well and truly “caught up” and could re-enter a traditional school. However, we now loved the home educating environment and Child C chose to remain in the home educating community. Child C is currently in Year 10 and is expecting to study engineering after he completes his Year 12 equivalent.

To us, home education was a lifeline. It changed the course of Child C’s life. He now has opportunities that would not otherwise be available to him. In a traditional school, it is not possible for a teacher to fully cater to the needs of each child and as such children like Child C are put into remedial classes and as they start behind they stay behind. This is well documented by numerous studies.

- Development delay v Timing delay

In a traditional school, Child C would have been labelled as having a “development delay”. My personal experiences have shown me that this label is incorrect. My child merely had a “timing delay”. Just as not all children crawl and walk at the same time, not all children will read and write at the same time. However, a traditional school system does not allow for that difference.

Timing delays are resolved in a home educating environment and the child catches up to its peers without stress and with their confidence intact. My son is now 16 and loves learning, is confident and happy. He is academically and socially strong. I don’t believe that these outcomes could have been achieved by him in a traditional school setting simply because a teacher cannot devote an hour or two each day to one child. Furthermore, the constant assessments would have resulted in low self-esteem. Home education allowed him to change his future.

Child D

When child D turned 5, we did not send her to our local school. By now we were enjoying both the social and academic benefits of home education. In Year 6, she sat the selective school test as I thought that she might wish to take up the option of a selective high school. She received an offer to Girls High School which she accepted. I did not tutor her for this exam which made her unique amongst her friends that now attend that school.

I feel that home education gave Child D a wonderful start in her education. She received a wonderful education, both academic and social. She did a mixture of one to one learning, group classes and social groups. By having friends across many ages, including adults, her social skills were enhanced. She had no problems adjusting to life in school filled with 1,000 girls.

Child E

Child E is currently in Year 5 and has not attended a traditional school yet. She is enjoying her learning environment and her friends.

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

I have home educated four children.

Child C

We chose to home educate Child C because of his weakness in learning to read and write. His educational needs were therefore all centred around finding the educational resources and teaching methods that would bring about literacy. We also used the services of speech therapists and occupational therapists.

His social skills were particularly strong and he found it easy to form friendships. Thus we did not need to provide a specific programme for building social skills and confidence.

A few years into our home education journey and the educational needs of Child C changed. He no longer needed remedial work or support from the speech and occupational therapists. Now, that he is in Year 10, his educational needs centre around the requirements of the Year 10 Certificate of completion and further on his Year 12 equivalent certificate.

Child C is a confident, respectful and helpful child who enjoys social activities with his peers. He is able to relate well to his peers as well as to people of all ages. Last year he began attending workshops at our local Mensshed and has found the company of the retired gentlemen interesting.

Children B, D and E

Children B, D and E are what the general public would consider “normal children”. They had no specific educational or social needs. They enjoy learning and playing with their friends. In terms of their specific characteristics, I would say that they are well adjusted young members of our community and relate well to people of all ages.

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

Home education differs significantly from a traditional school as well as distance education. In a traditional school and in distance education the majority of the learning occurs whilst sitting at a desk. Another key difference is that in a traditional school or with distance education, the pace of the lessons is determined by the teacher. This means that many children are not receiving an optimum education. Some children are bored as they already know the content whilst others struggle to understand the concepts. Home education allows each child to learn at their own pace and thus remain engaged with their education.

In the home educating environment, the world is our classroom. Our children can learn in a variety of places and through a variety of mediums. As a member of the Sydney Home

Education Network, I have access to many events that enhance my child's education. These events range from theatre performances to sports carnivals to art classes to history classes, to name just a few.

The 2013 Information Package sought to take away these wonderful learning opportunities by defining learning as only occurring when the educational programme is delivered in the home by the parent. The absurdity of such a position defies logic. Learning is never limited to a specific place and person.

Finally, home education provides flexibility in learning. Children are not robots and it is not possible to always be alert and ready to learn when the school bell rings. Home education allows the parent to adjust the programme so that learning is maximised.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

The 2013 Information Package issued by the Board of Studies was introduced without any consultation with the home educating community. The 2013 Information Package clearly showed that the Board of Studies does not understand the true nature of home education. My specific issues with the current registration framework are

- 1) The Information package was introduced without consultation.
- 2) The Information Package introduced major changes to the registration process.
- 3) The Information Package emphasises paperwork rather than learning.
- 4) The 2013 Information Package was not the result of the introduction of the National Curriculum, as claimed by BoSTES. A comparison of the 2011 and the 2013 Information Packages clearly shows that there are significant differences and that these differences do not relate to the introduction of the Australian Curriculum.
- 5) The 2013 Information Pack and the Authorised Persons Handbook repeatedly refer to the education programme being delivered in the home. This shows a lack of understanding about the nature of home education. Education occurs both in the home and outside the home. Group learning, creative arts, sporting classes and excursions, to name a few, are a valuable means of delivering a high quality education. Under the 2013 Information Pack these are classed as "extracurricular". The 2013 Information Pack needs to be amended so that references to the education programme being delivered in the home are removed.
- 6) Whilst the Q & A statement states that group learning is allowed, it specifies that is in addition to learning that is happening primarily in the home. In other words, extra curricular. An education programme cannot be confined to a place.
- 7) The 2013 Information Pack repeatedly states that the minimum curriculum requirements are the Board approved syllabuses. This is a drastic change and required consultation. Furthermore, this assertion is inconsistent with the Education Act 1990. The Act clearly states that the key learning areas can be delivered either by the adoption of the Board approved syllabus *OR* by an education programme endorsed by the Board. As the Act gives two options for delivering the minimum curriculum, the Board of Studies has overstepped its authority by mandating that

only the Board approved syllabus meets the minimum curriculum requirements. The 2013 Information Pack needs to be amended so that home educators are aware of their right to submit an alternative programme for endorsement.

- 8) The Board of Studies has published some Questions and Answers on their website by way of clarifying the 2013 Information pack. This document lacks authority and does not allay my concerns. Both the Information Pack and the Authorised Handbook have been written in a professional manner and come with the official Board of Studies logo and usual comments that indicate they are official documents. The Q & A lacks all of these. Furthermore, there is no direction in the Authorised Person's Handbook for the Authorised Person assessing a home education programme to consider the Q & A. Rather, they are advised to use the Information Pack and their Handbook. Whilst the answers in the Q & A have serious deficiencies, if the Board of Studies intends to stand by them they need to be included in both the Information Pack and the Authorised Persons Handbook.

Furthermore, the BoSTES and the Department of Education appear to be acting in a punitive way towards home educated children to the detriment of their education. These include:

- * Exclusion from educational opportunities that are available to school students in NSW such as TVET courses, Open High School, School Sports Programs including the "All Schools" carnivals, support programs for children with a disability. These educational opportunities are available to children attending private schools.
- * Requiring that the education program be delivered primarily by the parent. This is certainly not the case at a high school level when each key learning area is taught by a different teacher.
- * Limitation of the home education registration period to the mandatory schooling years between 6 and 17 years.
- * BoSTES refusing to register families that are travelling or away from their home address for longer than the school holidays. Yet, schools are able to grant permission for such travel and do not require children to do distance education during this time away from school.
- * Ineligibility for the award of the HSC

Appropriate registration

The decision to home educate a child or children is not taken lightly. The traditional school system offers many benefits to a parent, usually the mother. These benefits include the income received if the parent engages in paid employment or the ability to use the school hours as she sees fit. A parent who home educates their child gives up both of these options and benefits.

A parent loves their child and seeks to do what is best for that child. A parent feels a real sense of responsibility for the long term welfare of their child. This means that when a parent takes on the responsibility of educating her child the parent will ensure that the child

will be taught all the skills that are necessary to be able to participate in our community both as a child and later as an adult.

A more appropriate regulatory framework would be adoption of the Tasmanian model. The Victorian model is also more appropriate than the current NSW model.

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

My personal experiences with Authorised Persons have been positive. In discussions with other home educators, I find that there is a big variation in how their applications have been dealt. An authorised Person should have an understanding of what home education can look like. At a minimum they should understand the main approaches to home education, for example, Charlotte Mason, Classical, Steiner, eclectic etc and be aware of how the various approaches cover the curriculum. They should also understand that children learn at different rates and that this reality is reflected in the education programme presented.

Furthermore, in addition to the training provide by the Board of Studies, the Home Education Association or the Sydney Home Education Network or some other home educating representatives should be involved in the training. This would allow the Authorised Persons to better understand the unique nature of home education. Ideally, representatives from the home education community will also be part of the selection panel for the appointment of Authorised Persons.

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

The Education Act provides for courses of study to be undertaken in certain Key Learning Areas. A parent who developed a course of study based around these Key Learning Areas will be delivering a quality, well-rounded education. It is not necessary to base the education programme explicitly on the syllabus.

The Act also allows for a programme, other than that based on the NSW Syllabuses, to be endorsed. The current practice of BoSTES is not to endorse these programmes even though they meet the requirements of the Education Act. This practice needs to be changed. It is noteworthy that independent schools are able to offer the International Baccalaureate which is not based on either the NSW Syllabuses or the National Curriculum.

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

Home education offers my children many benefits. First of all, they are in a safe and nurturing environment. This was especially important for Child C as he was struggling academically at school. It is well documented that children struggling academically are often the target of physical and verbal abuse. These children lack the confidence to stand up to their peers due to their low self-esteem.

The primary school years are critical in the development of the character of the child. Growing up and learning in an environment that is generally free of the negative

socialisation effects that are common in traditional schools has meant that my children have confidence in themselves and a strong self-esteem. In practical terms, this means that they are very resilient individuals with a strong sense of wellbeing.

Home educated children do not live in a vacuum. They are a part of the community and as such are seen by many members of the public. This includes health professionals, scout leaders, youth group leaders, sporting coaches etc. All of these people have mandatory reporting requirements if they suspect any abuse in a child. These mandatory reporting requirements help to protect home educated children just as they protect all children and as such I don't feel that home education poses a greater risk of abuse than attending a traditional school.

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

The current registration process is not transparent and focuses on paperwork at the expense of learning. In order to maintain the required record keeping a significant amount of time needs to be set aside for this task.

The regulatory process can be improved by consulting with the home education community to better understand the nature of home education. Currently, there is no communication between the home educating community and BoSTES.

In terms of a registration process, THEAC is an appropriate model as it has both a support and registration function. Home educators are an important part of that body which is essential if the Board is to truly understand the nature of home education.

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

It is inherently unfair that home educated children do not have access to the same opportunities as children in the public and private education systems. Specifically, home educated should be allowed to access the following.

- TVET courses
- TAFE
- Open High school
- School Sports Program
- Hospital school programme

Part time schooling should also be an option, as it is in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory. The subjects to be taught by the parent and the school will be clearly defined so each parties understands their responsibilities.

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

BoSTES is not the appropriate body to represent the interests of home educators. Home education differs significantly from a traditional school and as such needs its own independent Board. This Board should consist of home educators and other educational professionals. This Board should report directly to the Minister of Education.

Until such time as an independent Board is established, the home educating community needs to be represented on BoSTES just like the public, Catholic and independent schools.

(f) any other related matter.

It is important that the home education community be consulted whenever regulations relating to home education are introduced or amended. It is fundamentally wrong for a government body with no real experience and understanding about such a unique area of education to set about making changes without consultation.

Many of the current issues being brought to the attention of the Minister of Education might have been avoided if consultation had occurred.

Home educators, BoSTES and the Minister of Education are all on the same side. We want the children to receive an exceptional education both in social and academic terms. We should work together to achieve this outcome.