

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Legislative Council Home Schooling Inquiry

Thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of homeschooling families who may feel less free to voice their points of view. I have been homeschooling for nearly 4 years in Victoria, after sending my oldest child to school for almost 2 years. I am active in several homeschooling networks locally and Australia-wide. I have two children of primary school age. Prior to becoming a parent, I was a primary school teacher in Australia and overseas. I think home schooling parents are some of the most intelligent people in the world, no matter what style of home schooling they choose, because they do their research and think things through.

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

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

I am grateful for the legal option to educate my child outside of a school, in Australia. We have been able to support our children's learning and development in ways that they best can thrive--cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically. We observe our children, notice their individual needs, and provide resources for their needs to be met, and then we celebrate their accomplishments and milestones.

There are many names, categories, and styles of home schooling, but none of these are necessary to discuss here as there are as many ways to home school as there are children who are home schooled. Each child deserves their needs be met on an individual basis. One thing to note, though, is that 'home school' does not have to look like school at home, and seldom does.

Last year, when the updated guidelines were published for home school registration in NSW, I had a look to see if there was some way I, as an educator and experienced home schooler, could help my friends and acquaintances understand any possible jargon. Instead, I was astounded by the detailed documentation required of families who were opting out of the system whose bureaucracy was failing their children.

I found it unreasonable that a family choosing to take responsibility for their child's education in NSW should be required to follow a similar daily schedule, let alone narrowly defined grade level expectations, as a school whose structure includes complicated class sizes and scheduling restrictions that are often based on coordinating time with specialist teachers.

A child who is reading on 5th grade level may have grade 2 math skills might be a 6 year old who needs to move around when thinking--do you put this child at the grade level that matches his age? Or do you allow the family to determine which resources would support that child's learning in each area at an appropriate level? Maybe this child is better off spending some time reading then jumping on a trampoline while noticing patterns in the environment, or helping determine the best way to spend \$10 for dinner ingredients at the supermarket. Maybe this child is better off without a daily schedule and will learn without being told when and what to learn.

Here, in Victoria, families may choose to define their daily routines and adjust their approaches to best suit their child, whose interests are close to their own hearts. Even without rigid formalities, Victorian home schoolers take their decision to home educate very seriously, as do all home educating parents, the world over.

No matter where we live, home schoolers do all we can to learn about learning, curriculum options, learning styles, home schooling styles, resources, anything necessary to support our

child's learning and growing, with or without administrators, or approved inspectors, or authorised persons. In fact, our learning about learning is probably more effective without the pressure and stress of feeling like we're being policed, simply because we want our children to succeed in life.

We can be more effective when we can focus our energy and attentions on our home schooling child, rather than trying to conform to the very system that wasn't working for our child.

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

(i) outcomes of home schooling including in relation to transition to further study and work,

I have met home schooled teens who live in NSW. They are articulate, well-mannered, bright young people, who get along well with younger children and adults alike. I have met adults who were home schooled. They are well-balanced, congenial adults who make valuable contributions to their local community.

(ii) financial costs,

In our family, our educational costs include materials for scientific exploration, internet, paper for printing/drawing/writing, scissors/pens/glue/tape, paints, toys, books, musical instruments; excursions to historical venues, zoo memberships and such, theatrical performances, camps; and classes to support special interests such as drama, gymnastics, horse-riding. Some costs are hidden in daily living such as costs for petrol and public transit, or for camping supplies for the whole family. Sometimes we spend more, stocking up for the rest of the year. Some years we spend more buying gear that will last into the next year.

Some families have long distances to travel, or disabilities, or other special needs that cost more to accommodate. Some people are able to adjust their working schedules to make it work, some families sacrifice an income. Low income earning home schoolers are denied Centrelink payments when their child turns 16. Every family's needs and costs are different. Some have needs beyond their budgets.

We take on costs for ourselves, and save money for the government; financial compensation would be helpful for many of us.

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

In our circle of close (home schooling) friends, we have people of at least 4 different religions, from at least 5 different countries, and of varying economical situations and educational backgrounds. We have home schooling friends who had children at the age of 17, and others who had children after age 40. The motivations for home schooling their children vary from philosophical to academic to social to emotional.

Our first child started school at age 5 and suffered anxiety because of verbal aggression on the part of her teacher, in addition to random threats of bodily harm from older students in the school's toilet block. School, for this 5 year old, was a loud, aggressive, frightening place. Our child has emotional sensitivities that couldn't be accommodated in the majority of school situations. That was our immediate motivation for home schooling, but there are also philosophical motivations as well. Home schooling is the only option that can meet the needs of our children.

We may not be in NSW, but our story is not dissimilar to families we have been in contact with in NSW.

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

I believe the process of registering in NSW is very daunting. The requirements are too specific to allow families to meet the variable needs of their children. Some of the required documentation makes more sense for schools to complete than for families. To have a stranger come into one's home to approve of the way the children are being educated is intimidating to say the least, and intrusive.

I don't blame anyone for choosing not to register, and choosing to spend their valuable time with their children, instead of worrying and writing and documenting the beautiful experience which is being with their children, whether it is called 'learning' or if even it's just experiencing life together.

Life is about relationships, not checklists.

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

People are not identical. Children are not identical. There can be similarities, but the over-reaching reason families choose to home school is that they believe their local school cannot meet their child's needs.

For my own children, it became evident that, at least until about age 9, they both need

- a stable environment without loud noises
- a consistent group of people of mixed ages
- adults they trust
- no testing or performance-oriented assessments
- open-structured activities where they can explore as much or as little as they feel driven
- time outdoors in nature
- plenty of time for undirected play
- availability of toys and craft materials and books
- frequent opportunities for excursions, like the zoo, bushwalks, post office, fire station, beach, etc.
- freedom to choose activities without coercion or persuasion.

With these needs met, I have found my children are naturally drawn to activities about a year or so after the time they would be told to do them in a school environment, and sometimes before. The oldest child decided to start a journal when she was 9 ½ and started reading chapter books at 6 ½, and my youngest child started doing multiplication and fractions at the age of 7. The youngest child also decided when he was ready to read, and learned to swim by watching others, without any lessons.

Parents need freedom to determine what their child needs and how to best accommodate their needs, and access to resources to support their pursuits.

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

School education is set up for theoretical groups of children, while home school education is set up based on individual needs of a real, known child.

I cannot speak about distance education, except that I have heard several stories where children did not respond well to the level of structure necessary to complete it.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

To reduce the number of unregistered home schoolers, I believe the process must do more to *empower* parents, while at present it can be a very discouraging process.

- Respect parents for making this difficult decision and honour the things they feel confident about, rather than stripping their confidence away.
- Offer resources to parents to help them learn about their child's needs and development.
- Offer resources to meet their child's needs, whether that is concessions on public transport and museums, or curriculum ideas, or the use of microscopes and other materials.
- Allow families undefined time to determine what their child needs. Children's learning need not be rushed.
- Allow families to decide what, when, and how learning happens (with general guidelines)
- Allow families to ask for the kind of help they need, and help them find it.
- If there's to be inspectors of some sort, make sure they understand and support home schooling, or better yet, have experience with it.
- Involve experienced home schoolers (of a variety of approaches and philosophies) in the process of setting up registration guidelines and resources.

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

Authorised persons should have experience/training in a variety of learning styles and approaches, be well-versed in child development and able to recognize abilities and needs with minimal interference (i.e., through conversation). They should at the very least be supportive of home schooling, if not experienced with it.

Their role should be supportive, as advisers and mentors, not as inspectors or testers.

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

Learning comes naturally to humans, and the best learning happens when the individual is open to it-- there can be all sorts of invisible barriers when an individual is expected or commanded to learn.

My first 16 years of schooling were a game for me, not something that helped me get along in life. **My home schooling children live in the real world**; I lived in a school and I didn't experience the world.

We learn how to live in and participate in a democratic society by living in and participating in a democratic society.

The academic disciplines are arbitrarily separated into a curriculum or syllabus. I don't believe standardised curriculum is necessary for a quality education.

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

My children are so much safer home schooling than they were at school. We have not come across the bullying that my first child experienced at school, in any of our home schooling activities--i.e., **my child has not been threatened with bodily harm since she left school**. My children feel safe playing in groups of children of varying ages, under the supervision of adults they know and trust, and also with teachers in their various activities. They have a sense of natural boundaries and have no need of fences. They spend long periods of time out of doors and in natural surrounds. They eat their lunches for as long a time as they need, and don't have anxieties from rushing through a schedule made by someone else. Their schedules are not rigid and they can attend to tasks far longer than is standard for their ages.

Furthermore, we have found that home schooling children are far less likely than schooling children to try to place themselves in a hierarchy of grade levels or social positions in order to fit in. When there has been aggression on a playground, the aggressor is often a child who normally attends school or who has recently left school. After a time of relaxing into home schooling, and not being compared to classmates throughout every day, that child becomes much more pleasant to socialise with.

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

Choosing to home school for many people is a new idea, but that doesn't mean it won't feel like a natural process once they feel it's the right choice for them and for their child. Some people are able to do this process on their own, while others need coaching through it

Appropriate regulation should include resources to help parents define their own goals as they seek to meet the child's needs. The best way to create goals is to start by asking reflective questions and stepping back to simply observe.

--What does this child enjoy? What does this child struggle with? Is there another way to approach x,y,z with this child, or is this the wrong time to bring it to the child's attention? What does this child need at this time?

--What do we have to offer? What resources should we seek in order to provide more effective opportunities for this child?

--How often do we need to review our goals? Are our goals based on our values?

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

Other than registering, being assessed and approved/denied approval, there is not much conversation about support offered to home schooling families.

There are numerous support groups and networks, a variety of online programs, valuable community programs, wonderful music and sports programs available to local school students...it would make things so much easier if these were pointed out and/or made available, particularly to new home schoolers or those who are struggling.

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

If BoSTES wants to help new home schoolers, BoSTES should consult with home schoolers and people experienced in home schooling, and invite them to participate in processes that help sort out issues concerning home schooling in NSW. There is so much to know and to understand about the many options and decisions a new home schooler faces, we rely on each other all the time for guidance and support, throughout the journey. It makes sense to include experienced home schoolers on the committee that oversees home schooling.

(f) any other related matter

Home schooling is a legal and viable option. If someone recognises the value of this choice for their own child, they deserve support to make it work.

Thank you for considering this submission.