

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Ms Elizabeth Parnell

Date received: 9/07/2014

Partially Confidential

RECEIVED

- 9 JUL 2014

LEGISLATIVE
COUNCIL

Elizabeth Parnell

The Director
Select Committee on Home Schooling
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Thursday, 3rd July, 2014

To the Director and Members of the Select Committee on Home Schooling,

My name is Elizabeth Parnell and while I consider myself to have been home educating since my children were born, I have been considered exempt from registration (as laid out under the provisions of the Education Act 1990) for home education in NSW since my eldest daughter turned six in 2009.

While on paper we are "Exempt from Registration", in practice there is no difference between what is expected of the education we provide our children, the documentation and reporting processes, nor the approval processes. So, for the purposes of this submission, please understand that we go through the same process as everyone else.

We have had the pleasure of welcoming three different "Authorised Persons" (hereafter referred to as AP or Aps) into our home over our years of home educating. They have all been pleased with the program we have provided our children with and supportive of our choice. They have made the process pleasant and seamless. We have never had any troubles being registered for the full term available to us.

I am supportive of the new policy for commencing home educators to receive a maximum of twelve months registration as two years can be a long time to go without feedback. However, in my circles of home educating friends and acquaintances I have discovered that it is not always such a smooth process.

I am concerned by the discrepancies in what is required to be proven by home educators in different geographical areas, overseen by different APs. While I am of the understanding that the recent Information Package sought to make the process clearer for all and more equitable, it seems to have broadened the difference in expectations. I have seen many veteran home educating parents quite distressed by the new process laid out in the recently published Information Package.

I would like to now address item b) ii) from the inquiry terms of reference being the financial costs of home educating. Our current annual budget allows approximately \$3300 for the year for home educating expenses. In reality, the cost is far higher as we had pre-purchased passes to relevant venues for excursions, had pre-purchased curricula for this year and we also use bonuses we don't budget for (such as tax returns) to purchase other educational equipment, books and the like. This expense covers our three children whom we are currently home educating, and doesn't take into consideration the resources we invested in over past years and are continuing to use. This cost is significant in our family budget, coming third in expenses (after the mortgage and groceries for the

year).

Financially, home educators are at a disadvantage as, on the whole, families have had to forgo a second income so that one parent is available to home educate their children full time. In the most recent figures I was able to find for the purposes of this submission, the NSW Government spent \$10,722 per full time primary student (in 2007-2008 Financial Year). While we are expected to provide an education of the same standard and scope as government and private schools, and in fact save the government in excess of \$10,000 per year, per student, we are provided with no financial support to do so.

To address item b) iii), being the demographics and motivations for home education, I will tell you a little about our family. We have five children, aged between almost-eleven (in year five) and twenty-one months old. My husband and I are both university educated completing bachelors degrees in Information Technology and Early Childhood Education respectively. We are Christians and, as such, felt that a public school education could not provide the comprehensively Christian education we wanted to provide for our children. While my husband earns a respectable wage, and I am a homemaker, the costs of private education for five children would be impossible for our family to meet and so we chose home education. As we have home educated over the years we have seen many other benefits to home education that keep us making that choice to educate our own children.

Our two eldest children had a twelve month stint in school when I encountered some health problems and felt that, for a season, I wasn't able to devote sufficient energies into educating our children. One of our children enjoyed the school experience and one did not, but we chose to bring them back home to continue their education as we still felt, after having the experience of a school environment, that the best place for them was at home. Although there were some concerns with one teacher, the school experience was not a negative one on the whole, and our children did get to experience some things, such as school choir, AFL Auskick and dance classes that we would not have otherwise been able to provide them with due to the prohibitive cost to obtain privately. Even with all these benefits, we still felt they were better educated at home.

Our children have their own challenges, particularly with anxiety, however they are contributing members to our church and home educating communities, as well as participating in community sporting events, being out in the community meeting people and learning, accessing facilities such as the local libraries and spending time with our large network of friends and extended family. We also have a pre-school aged child with autism who has benefitted greatly from his preschool environment and early intervention program and to this end, we feel he would be best educated in a support class in a local school environment, and are in the process of applying for this place.

I tell you this, so that you understand that we are not opposed to the school system in principal but are making the best choices for our children as we see it as their parents.

I would also like to address item c) iii) being adherence to delivery of NSW Syllabuses. As a trained teacher, and the daughter of a teacher, I am well positioned to understand the educational jargon that comprises a significant portion of the published syllabuses on the BOSTES website. However, as well educated as some parents are (be they doctors, lawyers, accountants etc) they struggle with interpreting the meanings of the outcomes. It can be quite intimidating, just as I would struggle to read a paper on immunology or torts law. I have also found, of late, that in the transition between the old syllabuses and the new Australian Syllabuses for NSW, the information is more cumbersome to access and confusing at times.

Being required to precisely follow the outlined syllabuses for NSW also brings limitations. It

doesn't allow for interest based learning, or to pursue in depth studies in art or science or history. The syllabuses are artificially fragmented in to Key Learning Areas (KLAs) which can also place a burden on a home educator who isn't comfortable enough with the jargon and format of the syllabuses to establish that making a timeline to fulfil a history outcome can also cover a stage three mathematics outcome.

I fully support the requirement that a program of instruction provide developmentally appropriate teaching in all KLAs as prescribed by the Board of Studies. However, I feel that the prescription of areas to be covered in each year to be unnecessarily limiting. For example, when we completed a year long course of study in astronomy my then five-year-old daughter demonstrated understanding and knowledge that covered most (if not all) of the outcomes for Earth Science across the entire primary curriculum.

I know that many stereotypes of home educated children abound, but I have been complimented numerous times on the polite and sociable manner of my children and also the depth and breadth of their knowledge, particularly in the areas of history and science. Apart from our presence in the community during school hours, there is nothing about my children that makes them stand out as different. Also, our years of education at home, prior to their stint in school, caused them no detriment. They were able to complete their grade-appropriate school work without issue and our child who sat for Naplan excelled in the test, giving credence to our belief that, at the very least, home education does not put our children at a disadvantage. Indeed, we believe that they have many advantages in being home educated that they would not be afforded in a school environment.

Home educating families are able to educate their children in ways that are not supported by the current education system in NSW, but have been proven by many research studies to be beneficial for both short and long term outcomes. As an example, in Finland, students work for 45 minute periods with a subsequent 15 minute break, before coming back for more instruction and learning. Decades of research in Finland have proven this to have an advantageous impact on students learning outcomes (see Anthony Pelligrini—*Recess: Its Role in Education and Development*), as does the comparatively delayed formal education commencement age of seven, and Finland tops the OECD rankings for education. Home educated children are also afforded more opportunities to learn first hand, rather than from textbooks or even websites and videos. Calculating the change for a \$5 note when buying a \$2.20 loaf of bread, in person, has more impact than working through a worksheet that covers the same question. It is simply not practical for a classroom teacher to take her class down the road to the local shops to purchase items several times a week, and no one would suggest that it ought to happen in that way in a school environment, but in a home educating household, it is part of our life and part of the way we educate our children.

In summary, I believe that every parent has the right to make choices about the way their children are educated and I am grateful that home education is a legal option in NSW. I believe that the current process of registration is onerous and places unfair and inequitable expectations on parents, while providing no support for them, despite my personally pleasant experiences thus far with the registration process. My hope is that the inquiry will be able to find a way to support parents who choose to home educate their children (both financially and with guidance in making educational decisions), simplify the process of registration while still expecting that all students in NSW, whether educated at home, in a government school or a private school, receive an education that will stand them in good stead in the future.

Yours Faithfully,

Elizabeth (Liz) Parnell