

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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Partially Confidential

Submission to  
Select Committee on Home Schooling

by

(Mrs) Alison Clark

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your inquiry into home schooling, and for taking the time to read this submission.

I have divided the submission into three parts:

Part One: a brief account of our family's home school history

Part Two: responses from our experience to the itemised terms of reference relevant to us

Part Three: concluding remarks.

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## **Part One - our home schooling history**

My name is Alison Clark and I am married to Graham Clark. I successfully home schooled our only child, [redacted], from 2002-2010. We were unregistered.

[redacted] was a gifted child. After completing an academic assessment with the then Australian Christian Academy (ACA) based in Queensland, [redacted] began her formal education at Year 4/5 level for most subjects. She was 5 years old.

Initially we used the ACA curriculum (self-instructional, which was perfect for [redacted]), but eventually abandoned much of it in favour of a broader, more balanced approach. We also participated in activities with other home schoolers and community groups on a weekly basis.

By age 12 [redacted] had completed most subjects to Year 10 standard, including an adult education horticulture course by correspondence. By age 13 it was becoming obvious that [redacted] needed to move on from general schooling.

In 2011, aged 14, [redacted] was accepted into Bedford College where she completed a Diploma of Business coming top of her class. The following year, aged 15, she secured a full-time position with Clayton Utz Lawyers as a legal secretary where she continues to be a much-valued employee. [redacted] is now 18.

## **Part Two - terms of reference responses**

### **(b)(i) Outcomes of home schooling**

Ironically, in our family's opinion good academic outcomes, while desirable, are not as important as good character outcomes. Education can only be deemed successful when it produces trustworthy, responsible citizens who are able to make a positive contribution to the lives of those around them and society at large.

In this respect, I believe our home schooling has achieved excellent outcomes. This is illustrated by a résumé and two references from 2010 (the year [redacted] finished home schooling) contained in the Appendix. There is also a copy of the award speech given about [redacted] by one of her lecturers at the Bedford College graduation ceremony in December 2011. These documents speak for themselves. They are a resounding affirmation of our home schooling success, and the positive contribution which [redacted] has already made to her community.

Incidentally, for the interest of Committee members, [redacted] also served two years in ministerial roles in the Legislative Council of the YMCA NSW Youth Parliament. At 17 she convened and chaired a community forum about changes to the NSW state planning laws, and in June this year she won a preselection ballot to run as the Greens candidate for the seat of [redacted] in the next state election.

Transition to further study and work was never a problem for us. Bedford College seemed quite happy to accept home schooled students with no school certificate on the basis of a portfolio and an interview. We had always kept a portfolio of [redacted] achievements for such a purpose. On completion of her Diploma, [redacted] could have articulated into university with a one year credit but, at age 15, having always wanted to be a secretary, she chose to enter the workforce instead, and easily secured a job. Her options remain open for further study as a mature age student, but currently her time is completely taken up with her work/church/political commitments.

From my knowledge of other home schoolers who have gone on to do tertiary study, they usually do very well because of their tendency to be more self-motivated and self-disciplined than other students.

Likewise, the transition to work is often easier because, as a rule, home schoolers are more used to interacting with people of different ages and backgrounds than are other school leavers.

### **(b)(ii) Financial costs**

Because we have always been a single-income family we did not have to make any financial sacrifices, i.e. forgoing one partner's salary, in order to home school. In fact, home schooling was a much cheaper option for us.

We have always lived frugally, and as home schoolers we became very adept at seeking out free/inexpensive opportunities for learning. The local library and the internet are a bottomless pit of resources, as are other members of the community willing to share their passion and expertise.

Not only have we saved ourselves a lot of money by home schooling, we have saved the government a lot of money too!

### **(b)(iii) Demographics**

We could be described as lower/middle class WASPs living in our own home in Sydney's southern suburbs. We were aged in our forties when we home schooled.

Father's education: Year 10 / TAFE certificate

Father's occupation: Motor mechanic

Mother's education: Year 12 / 2 Bachelor degrees

Mother's occupation: Home duties, part-time piano teacher, volunteering roles

## **Motivation to home school**

We had three main reasons to home school:

### **1. The influence of other home schoolers**

Prior to becoming parents, we had already come across several home schooling families and in every case we were very impressed by the social maturity and academic standards of the children. These families also had a great quality of family life. As a couple planning a family, home schooling seemed like an obvious choice.

### **2. Our Christian values**

As Christians we felt very keenly the responsibility of bringing up our child/children according to our Christian values, and this included taking full responsibility for their education.

(I might stress at this point that our intention was never narrow-minded indoctrination, since my husband and I sit at opposite ends of the theological/political spectrum. Our daughter has been exposed to many interesting and lively debates, and has had to draw her own conclusions.)

### **3. Dissatisfaction with the school system**

Having been through the school system ourselves, and myself having spent many years volunteering within the system, we were both convinced that I could do a better job of educating our child/children.

## **(b)(iv) Extent of unregistered home schoolers**

Of the hundreds of home schoolers we encountered during the period 2002-2010, most were unregistered.

## **Reasons for unregistered home schoolers**

Every family has their different reasons. In our case, we simply did not want to have some authority looking over our shoulder dictating what we had to learn and how/when we had to learn it. We wanted full control of our daughter's education.

giftedness was also a crucial factor here. By the time she had reached school age (5½), her reading and writing skills were as fluent as many adults and she could recite all her times tables up to twelve. Any kind of restriction at that point would have been detrimental, and may well have jeopardised her love of learning (something, sadly, which I have seen happen to many other bright children). We were not prepared to take that risk by submitting ourselves to any external regulatory framework.

The freedom to "go with the flow" of strengths and weaknesses (yes, there were weaknesses) was both challenging and invigorating. Home schooling turned out to be a wonderful educational adventure for all of us. In the end, received a much broader academic and social education than any of her peers in the school system. And, best of all, she retains her love of learning to this day!

### **(b)(v) Characteristics of home schooled children**

Over the years I have observed that home schooled children tend to have superior social skills to their school-educated counterparts (of course, there are exceptions). They are also generally better at directing their own learning.

I have also discovered that there are some pretty quirky kids out there in the home schooling world - but this is entirely positive! Home schooling gives children a chance to develop their own personalities in an environment free from negative peer influence, bullying, and the pressure to conform. One of my great thrills has been to observe how children removed from a stressful school environment have relaxed into their true identity and blossomed, when given the chance to home school. (I'm sure a study into the mental health benefits of home schooling would make inspiring reading.)

Once, when was 12, somebody asked her what the best thing was about home schooling. Her reply: "I'm free to be myself."

### **Educational needs of home schooled children**

The educational needs of home schooled children vary from family to family, child to child, which is why the flexibility of home schooling is so valuable.

In our case, the only area where we missed out educationally was ineligibility to enter certain competitions, for example, the Premier's Spelling Bee, because she was home schooled. We felt this was unfair.



Home schoolers, however, are a resourceful lot, and thanks to groups like Sydney Home Education Network (SHEN), we were not disadvantaged when it came to things like sports carnivals, excursions, science days, etc. We just organised our own!

### **(b)(vi) Comparison of home schooling to school education**

	Home schooling (from our experience)	School education
<b>Curriculum</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broader scope and variety</li> <li>• freedom to excel at own rate</li> <li>• more opportunities for community service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• limited content</li> <li>• dominated by time constraints and averages</li> </ul>
<b>Time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• flexible hours (e.g. sometimes work finished by breakfast, definitely no work after lunch)</li> <li>• lots of free time for personal development through creative play, pursuit of hobbies, community engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fixed hours for learning</li> <li>• time wasted on administration and maintaining discipline</li> <li>• less and less leisure time</li> <li>• burden of homework</li> </ul>
<b>Socialisation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• mixing and interacting with all ages on a daily basis</li> <li>• opportunities for meaningful relationships with adult friends as well as younger friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confined to peer group with limited adult engagement</li> <li>• adults', i.e. teachers', role restricted to that of authority figures</li> </ul>
<b>Context</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• natural learning environment - "the world is our classroom"</li> <li>• exploring life while in security of family unit</li> <li>• builds confidence and resilience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• classroom confinement</li> <li>• age/gender segregation</li> <li>• learning environment does not reflect life outside school.</li> </ul>

<b>Responsibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students encouraged to take responsibility for learning (e.g. set daily goals for herself using a self-instructional curriculum)</li> <li>• parents' role is supervisory</li> <li>• produces good time managers and self-motivated, lifelong learners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• responsibility for learning rests on teachers and schools</li> <li>• students tend to only learn what they are told to learn</li> </ul>
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### **(c)(i) Ways of reducing the numbers of unregistered home schoolers**

Trust. If the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES) could demonstrate a little more trust in home schooling parents to do the best by their children, it would make a big difference.

When regulations become onerous many parents are scared off.

In our case, I would have had no problem being registered if it simply meant a friendly annual visit from an authorised person to peruse portfolio and confirm that all was going well. But I would have objected strongly to being told how I ought to be doing things, and having our lifestyle and home environment scrutinised. We home schooled to escape the system, not to be shackled, albeit in our own home environment, by that system's regulatory framework.

Personally, I think the Board would have more success in reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers by abolishing, rather than introducing, more regulations.

### **(c)(iii) Adherence to delivery of NSW syllabuses**

We didn't adhere to any one syllabus. That was the beauty of home schooling.

In today's global and technological environment, I would view as very "old school" any regulatory framework which imposed restrictions on syllabus choice. There are many viable routes to the same destination.

### **(c)(iv) Potential benefits or impediments of a regulatory framework to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing**

In my opinion, the only potential benefit of a regulatory framework for home schooling to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing would be in the case of abuse or obvious neglect in the home. While there is

always this risk with home schooling (as there is among conventionally schooled children), I would argue that the risk is minimal since the overwhelming majority of parents who choose to home school do so because they desire the best outcomes for their children. Home schooling involves much sacrifice on the part of parents. It is not something entered into lightly. There is always the danger that a regulatory framework designed to weed out cases of abuse or neglect might unfairly impact upon the majority of families doing the right thing.

The notion of potential impediments of a regulatory framework to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing is somewhat more subjective, since the concepts of "welfare" and "wellbeing" are open to interpretation. This is particularly so in some religious or cultural contexts. The area of discipline and corporal punishment is a good example. I know many parents who would view any regulation which impinged upon their right to discipline their children as they saw fit as an impediment to those children's welfare and wellbeing.

From a different perspective, any regulatory framework which places onerous administrative burdens on a home schooling parent, thus creating stress and/or depriving that parent of valuable time with his or her child, could also be considered an impediment to that child's wellbeing.

### **(e) Representation of home schoolers within BoSTES**

I would strongly recommend the inclusion of representatives from the Home Education Association (HEA) within BoSTES. I am surprised that this is not the case already.

The experience of the HEA at the grass roots level of home schooling will prove invaluable when formulating policies and guidelines for the future.

### **(f) Any other related matter**

#### **Parental qualifications**

I have no teaching qualification. But I have a higher qualification: parenthood. As a parent, I know my child better than anyone else, and am therefore best-suited and qualified to take responsibility for that child's education.

I am increasingly concerned at the disempowerment of parents in our society. We seem to be at the mercy of "experts" everywhere we turn. The most common response I received when other parents found out we were home schooling was "Oh, I could never do that!" The general feeling was that, as

parents, they were not qualified to educate their children - it had to be left to the "experts". And yet nothing could be further from the truth!

Even from an academic perspective, of course no parent is the fount of all knowledge (as is no teacher). But this does not disqualify them from passing on what they *do* know to their children, and enlisting the help of others where they are lacking. Community networking is the key, not training or professional qualifications. As a matter of fact, it was the times when my daughter and I were learning new things together that were the most enriching in our home schooling experience.

I would hope that BoSTES's regulatory framework will always take into account and value the innate "expert" potential and capability of parents when it comes to educating their children.

### **Part Three - concluding remarks**

When we as a family look back, we all agree that unregistered home schooling was the best thing we ever did. As parents we have watched our daughter grow into a confident, hard-working young woman with a strong faith, an active social conscience, and a desire to serve the community. We credit this entirely to the way she was educated, namely, home schooling.

In many respects the term "home schooling" is a misnomer, since it gives the impression that what is going on in the home is the same as what is going on in the local primary or high school. From our experience and observation, this is rarely the case.

Home schoolers are notorious for thinking and operating "outside the square". Some even describe what they are doing as "unschooling". For a body such as BoSTES, which exists fundamentally to maintain the "square" and regulate what goes on within it, trying to accommodate families who wish to approach education differently presents a huge challenge. I would hope that, as a result of this inquiry, BoSTES would rise to that challenge.

Times are changing. In this 21st century, internet-shaped world opportunities for education are virtually endless. Many families, in recognising this, have chosen to move on from the traditional school model which is still very 19th/20th century in its philosophy and structure, and adopt the back-to-the-future model of home schooling. These families should be encouraged, and a way found for them to be recognised within the system without being penalised or having restrictions placed upon them.

In other words, the time has come for BoSTES to start thinking outside the square.

Thank you again for this opportunity to contribute to your inquiry. I trust you find this brief insight into our family's home schooling experience helpful to your deliberations. I would be quite happy to give oral evidence if called upon to do so.

Yours faithfully

(Mrs) Alison Clark

"Any child who can spend an hour or two a day, or more if he wants, with adults that he likes, who are interested in the world and like to talk about it, will on most days learn far more from their talk than he would learn in a week of school." - John Holt