

Submission
No 29

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

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,*

In some jurisdictions within Australia and NZ homeschooling is treated as, say, physiotherapy might be treated by the medical system. Necessary, useful, helpful and a great adjunct to the mainstream medical model, one which serves to make the mainstream model more effective.

In NSW the regulation creep has meant the registration process is onerous, intrusive and largely irrelevant - being registered by people who have little understanding in homeschooling, who come to your house and cast judgement and who work off Key Performance Indicators that have almost nothing to do with the welfare of the children in question means that homeschoolers are, increasingly, dropping out of the process altogether. This helps nobody.

Homeschooling is not the easy option. If you want a break from your kids, for free, you send them to school every day, you do not try to educate them yourself. So creating a process of registration that feels like the burden of proof is on the parents to demonstrate that they are not neglectful is insulting and, again, missing the point. If the point of registration is to catch the tiny number of people who are doing the wrong thing by their children then making it so onerous it encourages people to drop out will only result in those people staying well clear of the system.

An easier, more supportive registration system will mean more people register, more people reach out for support when needed and more children will get a better education.

I would like to see the following in a home education registration system:

A simple declaration of the intent to homeschool as sufficient evidence, with 6 monthly or yearly declarations to maintain currency.

This declaration will provide parents with access to the same kinds of activities other school children have access to, like learn to swim programs, Department of Sport and Rec camps, travel concession cards, visitor links and the negotiated possibility of part time schooling with local schools to encourage strong community relationships and social integration and, in recognition of the fact that these families are removing the financial burden of educating their children from the tax system, an education supplement paid yearly to homeschooling families.

A registration system such as this is full of incentives to register. If you register, which is a simple process, you get support, access to services, more avenues for positive social interaction and money to help pay for books, field trips and other materials. If you don't register you get nothing. The children win, the local schools win (homeschool parents are notoriously generous at volunteering their time and skills and as a teacher I know how eager I am to expose my classes to a diversity of people), local communities win because home educated people will be a more active part of communities they feel supported by, the government and tax payers win and society at large wins since statistically, home educated children are highly unlikely to end up in the criminal justice system and tend to go on to become contributing, positive members of society.

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

(ii) financial costs,

As home educated children save the government a significant amount of money parents home educating their children should be given an education supplement.

Most home educating parents also forgo one full time income to remain at home with their children full time until late high school. This is done purely to provide the best possible education for their child and should be recognised by allowing that parent access to travel concessions for field trips and other

educational expenses to be taken off on tax as would be appropriate for a teacher incurring costs in the line of their work.

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

We have homeschooled our children for significant periods of time, for a range of reasons.

I am a qualified teacher, and an Australian diplomat. My husband is a doctor. We began homeschooling when our oldest daughter came home from preschool saying she was 'no good at reading or writing'. Her bubbly, confident personality changed and she reverted to sucking her thumb and I felt that four years of age was too young to learn the message that she was not good enough so I decided to take her out of the school system until it was compulsory to go to school at age six.

Once we began homeschooling I threw myself into the study of educating a child at home and despite having a degree in education I learned a great deal, and became a far better teacher through the process of educating my own child. The results we saw, and the return of her happy, sociable personality encouraged us to keep going, and our younger two children have also been home schooled.

They are all currently attending their local school as we moved to a new area and wanted our children to make friends locally from the wider community. They were received with open arms and each one fitted easily into the new context. They win awards, one of them has been moved up two grades, another is a school representative for visitors to the school and the third is a quiet, average student.

For us, the journey of homeschooling has been ideal, our family and community have been accepting and supportive and the experience has enriched our children and those we spend time with. Having devoted many years of study to home education and having experienced the process myself we are all convinced we will return to home education before too long, despite enjoying our local school.

I would like to return to work full time, but there is simply too much to be gained by providing a child with a passionate, fully-engaged, devoted educator to miss this opportunity. Home schooling is not for everyone and it is not for every situation but it is an absolutely essential adjunct to the mainstream system. There are all kinds of people homeschooling, for all kinds of reasons, and this diversity is not to be feared but celebrated.

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

I did NOT register the whole time I homeschooled my children. Having spent a great deal of time understanding the process and the theories of learning I felt that undertaking an onerous and punitive registration system would necessarily change the way I approached the education of my children. Research on the way the human brain learns, processes and retains information points to a style of education that is possible in the kind of intimate, safe, high teacher to student ratio you have in a homeschool environment. We can consider relevance, motivation, interest, emotional state, social and emotional intelligence, scaffolding and connection and we can create experiential, student-directed negotiated learning experiences.

But if we have to spend many hours focusing our minds on how to tick BOS boxes we necessarily skew what, and how, we teach just as our education system has shifted to reflect NAPLAN testing and end of highschool testing. This is counterproductive in any educational setting.

I would very gladly register that I homeschool, I make no secret of it and prefer to be IN the system than outside of it but the current NSW process is akin to the development aid industry - everyone working to please the donors rather than the beneficiaries the money was supposed to help. The BOS doesn't need pleasing, our children need educating.

And I would jump to register if I knew that along with a simple process I would get freedom, support, financial incentives and access to services.

As it stands now, however, I would go out of my way to remain outside the registration system, even to the point of moving my family to a different jurisdiction if necessary.

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

I have three children so three different characteristics and educational needs. When my oldest was in preschool the teacher gave her physio clay in a bid to help her sit still without zoning out and suggested that perhaps she was on the ADD spectrum. She was physically incapable of staying still until she was over eight years old and even then required constant stimulation to stay present. Homeschooling her was sometimes tricky but she quickly learned to read and write and maths was no problem though one teacher asked me 'how did you teach her to read?' Answer: I let her jump and jiggle at the table while we learned. This is not appropriate in a large classroom setting as 30 kids jumping and jiggling would be chaos, but it is possible at home and as a result she is ahead of her age group at school. I firmly believe that if I had kept her at school she would now be lagging far behind and be disheartened and convinced that she was 'dumb'.

My second child is capable of sitting still and concentrating for long periods of time. He doesn't like to leave anything undone and so fits the school system perfectly. He raced through his work at home and by the time he went to school he was two grade levels above his peers and still not strongly challenged. His classroom teacher doesn't have time to push him individually and we have no gifted program at our school. At home I could cater to him at whatever level he was at in every subject.

Our youngest is quiet, shy and easily shaken. She finds school quite tough because one minute her peers are great friends, the next they're off playing without her and while the other two found their feet very quickly with their peers at school she finds it hard to make sense of all the social game playing. At home I was able to spend time making explicit the social rules, and introduced her to social activities at a pace that suited rather than overwhelmed her. Her confidence had built and she was keen to try school but after two terms I can see she is struggling again and I am considering giving her a break to build her social resilience back up again because her emotional state necessarily impacts on her learning.

Every child is different and has different needs. Providing for a system where parents feel supported to choose the best option for their child (which may change over time) will result in the best possible education for all our children.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

As mentioned earlier, with a very simple declaration instead of an onerous registration process, I would register and stay registered and this would be the single most effective way to encourage the vast majority of parents to register.

For the minority who have some kind of concern over government in general and prefer to remain outside of the system the support and access to services and financial incentives would be enough to push most of those over the line.

Of course you will find a tiny minority of people in every corner of the country who for whatever reason are just too suspicious of anything to register and I can't see any way of flushing those people out if they are determined to remain hidden. But legislating for the extreme minorities is going to result in very inappropriate legislation for the majority.

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

I have no experience with APs, only anecdotes, and most of them have been rather negative (since people rarely go into detail about positive, easy experiences).

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

As a qualified teacher with a great deal of experience I have a strong sense of how a child should be tracking both emotionally and across the curriculum. I use the NSW syllabus as a reference guide but do not follow it strictly. As a teacher I am also well aware of the vast differences in every classroom so I prefer to look at education as a long game - I plan to provide an education to my children that will develop positively contributing adults by the time they are ready to leave home. Happy, healthy, productive and socially adept human beings. With that as my end goal I work back and we fill in gaps as we go, based on their interests and my understanding of what skills they will need to be highly functioning adults.

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

Home educating my children has given me the chance to learn so much about my children. It was through this process that we moved to a more rural location with some land and a small, strong community where they thrive.

My children have thankfully never experienced any serious bullying or abuse although one of their friends is now in therapy after experiencing constant harassment (in primary school) and I am thankful that not only could that not happen in my home under my watch, even when they are going to school they know that they will never have to helplessly accept whatever bad behaviour anyone wants to throw at them because they have options.

Many adults have a rather old fashioned view that children should not learn that they can simply give up, they must learn that they have no choice and must stick at whatever it is they are doing. I agree wholeheartedly that children must learn the discipline of perseverance however giving a human being no choice over their lives, their destiny, giving them no sense of agency is jailing them and people in prison camps rarely walk away without mental scarring.

Some of the teachers at the school my children currently attend were rather harsh on them when they first attended, perhaps in the mistaken belief that as homeschooled kids they would have 'attitude'. My children are very keen to do the right thing and soon cured their teachers of the need to put them in their place but my middle child often came home chafing under the apparently absurd rules. There is a big difference between allowing children to 'run riot' and giving them no sense of agency whatsoever. Neither of these extremes is healthy and at home we are able to find the balance between these - the point at which the child has significant control over their lives without encroaching on the rights of others. This is true child welfare.

The truth of abuse is that it happens every day, every where. To say that no homeschooler abuses their child would be ridiculous, but schools are full of abused children. Just because they turn up to school in their uniform does not mean horrible things are not happening to them at home and no amount of mandatory reporting can change that.

I am passionate about child welfare, having worked with adult survivors of abuse, and our child welfare system is woefully inadequate to the task. I am 100% behind providing more support and early intervention for children in vulnerable positions. But punitive measures (including onerous registration processes and punishment for non-attendance at school) will do absolutely nothing to curb child abuse.

Child abuse is an urgent issue and we are failing our children horribly, however it should not be conflated with homeschooling. Homeschooling should be dealt with on its own, and child welfare should be dealt with universally and regardless of what style of education a child is involved with - every child has an equal right to a safe environment.

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

The goal of regulation must be considered. If the goal is a statistical one and the greatest number of registrants is the aim then the lowest possible hurdle is the most appropriate form of regulation as you will then net the greatest possible number of registrations.

If the goal is to improve the understanding of home education then a questionnaire would be more appropriate.

If the goal is to improve home education then support, including an induction pack of information and resources, a support team, ongoing education incentives, access to resources, an education supplement, tax incentives and other assistance would be appropriate.

If the goal is to check on and quantify the results of home education then including home educated kids in the NAPLAN testing system would be absurd, just as it is in mainstream schooling, but you'd get some standardised figures for the reports. (A lot of home schooling parents would refuse to register just because of this but, if that's not the goal it doesn't matter).

If the goal is to keep children safe then registration should be utterly minimal, almost non-existent, and access to school activities such as swimming lessons or regular sports days should be highly incentivised so that you have the greatest possible number of registrants AND regular contact with mandatory reporters.

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

I would like to see access to support that is available to students in government and private schools but not to home educated children. Some examples include access to TVET courses, Open High School, School Sports Programs, Hospital School programs and support programs for students with a disability.

I would like to see home educated students able to be part-time enrolled or enrolled as visiting students in school in order to access particular subjects, support or programs (as negotiated with individual schools).

I would like to see access to government payments, travel concessions, education supplements to help with materials and tax concessions that recognise the role homeschooling parents play as teachers of relatively small classrooms. We may be paid nothing but certainly our jobs should be recognised through the tax system so that we can deduct expenses related to our work.

I would like to see genuine support in place - information packs, research, support teams in place for crises or beginning homeschoolers. People are more likely to reach out for help if they know there is genuine support out there.

Along with these suggestions, a supportive attitude would go a long way.

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

There are 23 members on the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards. They include teachers, principals, nominees of the Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools, an expert in early childhood education, an Aboriginal person and various others. There is no member representing home educators on the Board, even though BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW. I think that BoSTES should be required to have a member that represents the home education community as well.

(f) any other related matter.