

Submission
No 123

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

I am a homeschooling mum of six children, four of whom are still of school age. I have at least 18 years of official experience of home schooling. In this I am not counting the years from birth to age 5 when all parents generally are the main educators for their children.

I am grateful for the opportunity that this inquiry provides to express our ideas about home schooling. I believe that home schooling is generally an excellent way to meet all of a child's needs - physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and academic.

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

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

It seems currently to be a lengthy process to withdraw a child from school, even in the case of that child being bullied. It would be great to see some kind of system introduced where children can more easily be transitioned from schooling to home schooling (especially when they are distressed with bullying or abuse at school).

(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,

We have six children who we either have home schooled or are home schooling. The older four are aged 23, 21, 19 and 15. They are well-educated and well-spoken young people, who mix readily with others from a wide range of backgrounds, and across all age groups. They show both social and emotional intelligence in their dealings with others.

Our eldest child, a daughter, was home schooled for kindergarten, and then for Years 3 to 12 after doing Years 1 and 2 at a local state school. She completed her Year 12 Certificate through home schooling, and this was in the same year that we had our sixth child, who had some serious health issues. At the time, she was able to complete her full-time workload for her year 12 course work, study and sit for the internationally recognised SAT exam, pass the AMEB Grade 8 piano with a B+ result, gain an ATAR score of 82 and worked part time teaching piano. (She also was able to gain a lot of practical experience in caring for a newborn with some health issues, including tube feeding for a few months. Although we did not ask this of her, she said she wanted to do it as it gave her a chance to learn about how to care for a baby.) After completing year 12 at home, she gained entrance to a BMus degree, which she completed in 2012, with distinction in her major study, piano. She has recently married, and is working in both piano tuition and office administration.

Our second child, a son, went to school for kindergarten, and by the end of term 3 that year started suffering from extreme separation anxiety. This little boy began his kindergarten year as a bright, happy and well-adjusted 5 year old, but by the end of that year was struggling significantly emotionally, academically and physically. He was unable to sleep at night, and hated being left at school each day - even to the point of chasing us out the gate when he was dropped off in the mornings. We knew that his teacher did not seem to understand his struggles with reading and writing (he has dyslexia), and we gradually discovered that he was being bullied in the playground - even by his sixth grade 'buddy' (so much for the 'buddy system' to help 5 year olds adapt to school). It was only many years later we discovered that he had also been physically/sexually abused by an authority figure (which seems to have been the school counselor).

When this child was transferred to home schooling in year 1, he was much more successful with his studies, as home schooling allowed us to cater to his specific learning needs (in regards to dyslexia) and he was obviously feeling safer and more secure at home after his traumatic school experience. From Year 1 onwards he maintained an average of 80% or better in all his school work up to Year 11. Unfortunately, he contracted Ross River Fever when he was in the middle of year 12, and due to this illness (and the resulting post-viral fatigue) never completed the last few months of his school work to gain his year 12 certificate.

He was a very bright child, with significant giftedness in music and dance. Home schooling allowed us to cater for his educational needs in core subjects (in regards to his struggle with dyslexia) and also to allow him plenty of time to develop his obvious talents in music and dance.

and other creative pursuits. Because of this, even before he got Ross River Fever, he had already completed all his AMEB piano exams up to and including Performance Certificate by 15 years old. (Performance Certificate is a recital exam beyond grade 8 piano). He also had completed all his classical ballet exams up to Advanced 1 with the RAD Syllabus. (Advanced 1 is approximately the third last exam available). A remarkable feat, given all the practice time that these two disciplines both require. Before he fell ill, he was planning to pursue a career in dance and later music, which meant that it was important that he have the time to concentrate on these two areas.

At this point in time, he is 21, due to his health (after Ross River) he has been unable to pursue a career in professional dance, but he is working in the music industry composing and producing his own music, and also composing music for others who have commissioned him. He has also worked with well-known professionals in the music industry, including Jon Foreman.

Our third child, another son, is 19 and is currently completing year 12, through home schooling. He has home schooled from K to 12. While home schooling he has been able to pursue many interests, including piano, pipe organ, singing, lap dancing, classical ballet, car maintenance and building skills (with his father). He is currently working on the AMEB's AMusA level, and Trinity College London's ATCL level in piano - he will sit for these internationally recognised professional diploma level piano exams later this year. In 2015 he will be studying in the BMus program at University Conservatorium.

Our fourth child is also a son, and is 15 years old. He is currently in year 9 (home schooling). He has also home schooled from Kindergarten. He is currently studying Maths, English, Biology, History, Geography, Etymology, Literature, and Successful Living, and achieves a high academic standard across all subjects. He has also built a full model railway from scratch, a mezzanine bed for himself, and a book case for his bedroom (with his fathers help). As he is exceptionally gifted in classical voice, we outsource his singing tuition, and he is very keen to follow this as his career path. He is also working on his piano skills (doing grade 7 later this year) and music theory skills (currently sitting for grade 3) as he knows that the combination of excellence in singing, piano and music theory will help him to gain entry to Sydney Conservatorium's Opera School when he completes year 12.

Although he has struggled with learning disabilities over the years, home schooling has allowed the flexibility needed to cater for this, including a low pupil to teacher ratio. Although he did not read till around the age of 9 or 10, he now reads confidently, widely and for his own pleasure. As

he was home schooled, he was not caused to feel embarrassment for being unable to read till older as he might have felt, had he been in a heavily peer based environment.

Our fifth child, a daughter, is 9 years old, and is studying at grade 3 level (home school). She has never been to school. She is very competent in reading, writing and maths now, although she did struggle with reading and maths up to 8 years of age. Home schooling has given us the flexibility to allow her to learn in ways that are meaningful to her, even when she wasn't ready for book based learning. It surprised us to see that she learnt to read music, before she was ready to learn to read English, and that having this as an option in her learning environment actually seemed to help her then master reading. She currently enjoys learning piano, violin, and ballet. She loves cooking, and readily helps with tasks around the house (as do all our children).

Our sixth child, a son, is nearly 7 years old. Having had serious health issues when born, he is still battling development delays/learning disabilities. He has some vision issues (including an obvious squint), is delayed in gross motor development, and is not yet fully toilet trained. Although he enjoys being read to, he is not understanding concepts of phonics or achieving any letter recognition. He can only count to 10. Home schooling benefits him very obviously, as I am able to provide one-on-one tuition for him. I think he would particularly struggle with a traditional school environment, including the high pupil to teacher ratios and peer based socialisation. He may be also subjected to significant bullying from his peers as he is obviously different to other children his age.

Socialisation - Home schooling has especially benefited all of our children in allowing them time to get to know each other, and learn how to get along. As a result of this they work together well, and enjoy spending their free time together. Home schooling also has the benefit of allowing children to be educated in the context of the real world, allowing them to socialise with people of all ages, rather than just their own peer group. I find home schooled children generally very able to relate well to people of all ages.

(ii) Financial costs,

Home schooling families generally save the government money by taking the full costs of their children's education on themselves, yet despite us paying our taxes as anyone else does, there is no financial support for home schooling from the government. This would seem to be an unfair system as other forms of education can access government support, and I would like to see this

same kind of government funding extended to include those who choose home schooling as the best option for their child.

Home schooling families are often low income, as one parent must sacrifice paid work to be able to home school. In addition to this, when a home schooled child turns 16 their parents are denied continuing family benefits from Centrelink for that child, and this has a large impact on their family economy.

Since it is both possible and legal to home school up to year 12, then I believe that Centrelink family benefits should be aligned to reflect this. Otherwise, Centrelink is effectively discriminating against those families who home school. Lower income families of children who are enrolled in a school for year 11 and 12 can access these family benefits, so why is it not just as readily for home school families of year 11 and 12 students?

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

I have completed a degree at university level, and my husband has completed a TAFE diploma level course.

We know many long term home schooling families around NSW, and the parents generally have a range of different backgrounds - some parents have TAFE level of education, some have university level education, and some have only year 10/12 level education, and yet they all seem to be quite capable of finding the material and experiences they need to provide their children with a good education.

The home schooling parents that I know are generally motivated to home school as they want to provide their children with the best possible educational environment in which to learn, grow and mature physically, spiritually, emotionally and mentally.

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

I personally believe that parents are ultimately responsible for their own child/ren's education, and parents should therefore have the right to choose to not register, and be forced to have their educational choices scrutinised by the state. To have compulsory registration has the appearance of assuming that the state knows better than the parent what each individual child needs, when in fact the state (or their representative AP) doesn't know the child at all.

I, and several of my home schooling friends in various places around NSW have found some visits of Authorised Persons to be unreasonably intrusive at times. They seem to focus more on whether or not our home schooling meets the requirements of the state, than whether or not we are meeting the needs of the child. Perhaps this deters some people from registering their home school. However, streamlining the registration process, having better training for APs, and the APs having a more positive attitude to home schooling may encourage more families to register.

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

I have addressed this in point (i) above.

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

Over our 20 years with school-aged children, we have experienced traditional state school education, home schooling, and distance education. We have definitely found home schooling to be the most flexible and the best form of education when it comes to meeting the needs of the whole child.

When our eldest children were in state school they were too cloistered away from the every day world - they did not participate in normal every day activities such as shopping, banking, caring for babies/toddlers, caring for the elderly, etc and because of that missed out on important life learning.

Distance education was in some ways good, however with the additional NSW government requirements placed upon the private schools providing this for us, the sheer volume of extra work required of the students over and above the core curriculum was excessively time consuming and burdensome, and not necessarily able to be tailored to the students specific areas of interest/giftedness - yet in education quantity of work has never equaled to quality of learning.

Home schooling has been the best option for us as it allows us to create a learning plan and environment which is specifically suited to each child. Home schooling tends to take place not only inside the home, but also outside the home, and can be well combined with shopping expeditions (Maths and English/Communications), trips to the park (Science and PE), visits to places of interest (museums, oceanariums, art galleries, historically significant sites, etc), and educational outings (libraries, special interest clubs and concerts).

When we take family holidays, we tend to arrange them around further educational experiences for our children (eg, Canberra, where we can visit the War Museum, Parliament Buildings, etc)

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

I feel that any laws made by the government need to consider and allow for all genuine types of home schooling (eg, Charlotte Mason, Steiner, Montessori, ACE, etc) because all children have different learning styles, different gifts, and different needs and this will affect which type of home schooling will be best for them.

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

I have not registered for the last 9 years as we have been officially enrolled in a Queensland Distance Education school, however one of our reasons for choosing this Distance Education option was negative experiences with our home school inspector (or AP). In view of our experience, it would be an excellent idea if home schoolers were consulted about the registration process.

I am not sure that compulsory registration is necessarily important as I have seen unregistered home schoolers provide excellent education for their children without any state control or input. But I do think that if home schoolers are required to register they should also be entitled to receive some funding to assist them in home schooling.

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

AP's should have a thorough understanding of and respect for all the many and varied approaches to home schooling. They should be very aware that no matter how considerate they are, their visit will still most likely be a cause of quite real stress for the parent (and possibly also the children) as it can feel very intrusive to have a stranger come into your home to assess your children and your education of them.

Although I do address all KLA's and use a more traditional approach to education in home schooling our children (we use workbooks, text books, projects, etc) and we have a detailed Scope and Sequence document to support and explain this, the AP that we were dealing with at the time displayed a significant lack of knowledge in the materials we were using (even though these home school materials are widely used around Australia), and this was most unhelpful

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

A government derived syllabus may tend to be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to education, which may not allow for either special needs or gifted students. Trying to teach to such a syllabus may end up being inappropriate for some children. I believe that quality education can only be achieved by understanding a child well, looking at their needs and gifts, and then tailoring a program that will meet that child's specific learning needs. Within any government syllabus, there needs to be the flexibility to do this.

It is also important to note that home schooling happens not only in the home, but also in the wider community as home school families take advantage of educational outings and events. This sort of learning and interaction is often facilitated by local home schooling support groups. In view of this, regulation of home schooling needs to allow for the fact that home schooling does not just occur at home.

At this point, it is also interesting to note that the Board of Studies recommends that students at year 10 level and beyond can follow the syllabus and study for the HSC. However, they will not be permitted to sit for the HSC exams, or to use this to gain university entrance. This seems to be quite bizarre to me as I can see no reason to prevent home schoolers from sitting for the HSC should they choose to do so. I think that this anomaly should be corrected and that HSC exams should be an option for home schoolers, even though this is not a pathway that I would choose for our children.

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

Home education has provided us with the ability to protect our children from abuse within the school system, from either teachers or children. With our eldest son's experience in kindergarten this is exceptionally important to us.

I am aware that some people feel that home educated children are vulnerable to being abused because they are not being seen in school every day, however, this seems silly, as even home schooled children are seen by doctors, dance teachers, sports coaches, music teachers, friends, and others who can notice abuse and report if a child is at risk. In fact, I firmly believe that children are less safe when they are in an environment with strangers who don't particularly know them well or personally care for them (eg, teachers and other children) - witness the problems with

school bullying often discussed in the media, and school teachers who have been convicted of paedophilia.

In general, home schooling can provide a good environment for a child in which to feel physically, socially and emotionally secure so that he/she can learn and grow to maturity.

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

I feel that there should be a member representing home educators on the Board, as BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW.

In Conclusion:

I have told our story so far from the point of view of a home schooling mum, however, I am also a fully qualified music teacher, with a university level degree in both music and education, and school classroom teaching experience. I am currently a fully accredited member of the Music Teachers Association of NSW, and have had 20 years experience in private teaching.

It was in fact my experiences during my teacher training and working before having children, that led my husband and I to seek out a better alternative to educate our own children. My training and teaching experience as a teacher did not help me in home schooling - in fact, as teacher training is always geared towards large group education with 25 to 30 per class, any strategies that I had learnt for classrooms were irrelevant when it came to home school. Initially it was quite challenging to change my thinking and my teaching strategies, and instead customise lessons to each child's needs. However, the individual and small group tuition style utilised in home schooling is certainly a much more efficient and effective way for many children to learn.

It is interesting to note that there are many successful learning programs available online, for free, which have been made available by people without any actual education qualifications, but who are simply specialists in their field. 'Khan Academy' is one such example, but there are certainly plenty of others. It would appear from this that one does not need a degree in education to be able to teach others effectively. Perhaps it is time that we as a society stop assuming that our schools have the best approach to education, and that qualified teachers have a monopoly on fostering learning - I know that won't please the teachers unions, but I do feel that it may well be true. Yes, I totally agree that there are many wonderful teachers in the mainstream education

system, however I think that the system itself is an outdated and inefficient model of learning, which caters for the 'average' child, and unfortunately allows a lot of children (especially gifted learners and slow learners) to slip through the cracks and miss out on an education that allows them to achieve their full potential. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 7.3 million Australians - almost half the adult population - have problems with literacy, what does this say about our current school system?

Over the last two decades we have known many home schooling families, and have watched their children grow up to be mature, self motivated adults. There are many fully home schooled people who have gone through university to gain the relevant degree/s and they are now working in fields such as medicine, engineering, science, art, professional dance, surveying, computing, music, and education just to name a few. I cannot think of any people I know who have home schooled and who struggle as adults with literacy in any way.

I am not advocating for schools to be abandoned - both public and private schools certainly have a place, but making home schooling a more viable and accessible option for families will greatly improve the educational opportunities for many children. Improving educational opportunities for children will ultimately benefit our communities and our society.

Thank you for taking time to read my submission

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