

Submission  
No 116

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date received:** 7/08/2014

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Partially Confidential

## Headings Summary

Why we Started Homeschooling.

Why we continued homeschooling.

Who homeschools.

Homeschoolers interacting.

Advantages.

How and Why the system is broken.

National Curriculum

Travel and Registration

Fixing the System

## Why we Started Homeschooling.

We have been homeschooling for 7 years. Our four children range in age from 5-12. They have never been to school. We started homeschooling with the view of only going to the end of infants school. We wanted to have more input into their emerging personalities than their peers. We both had a great experience at school. We both went to university and have professional careers. We were not opposed to schooling but had just decided it was not for our family.

### Why we continued homeschooling.

Once we started homeschooling, we started to see education from a different perspective. Our two oldest boys, who are only 18 months apart but would have been 2 years apart in school grade, became best friends. The difference we saw in how our kids interacted with the world made us appreciate that socialisation, as offered in school, is a far inferior model. We frequently have people tell us that they have never met such good communicators. Our children became proficient in relating to babies and grandmas and are confident speaking with people of all ages. They don't box themselves, or other kids, as being in a different year of schooling so not a suitable friend.

Initially people used to say to us, that socialisation was the biggest concern they had about homeschooling. But now when people say that, they stop and then they say... "Actually, I've met your children and I don't think it is going to be a problem."

When I finished my pharmacy degree I had to enter the "real world". I had until that point only really mixed with people my own age. Suddenly I had to be a leader of people who were younger or older. I had no idea. It took me several years to learn how to relate to older people. I think being segregated so much based on age affected my social skills and also my career.

Home Education is on the forefront of educational research. Individualised learning plans is what every school would love to be able to achieve and in home education it is possible. Home educated children achieve academically well and are able to develop their strengths at their own pace not that of their peers. This means that they are often years ahead in some subjects. One of my sons is very gifted mathematically. He is doing some maths work which is 5 years ahead of his school grade. We don't have to limit him in any way. The August 2013 Information Pack requires prior approval to teach above or below their grade level. We know of one child

who was refused permission to learn one year ahead in maths because his history for the year was not completed. This is ridiculous yet shows that the Information pack was being interpreted in a way that disadvantaged childrens progress. My children do not fit neatly in a grade anymore. I have not had to hold them back from their strengths.

#### Who homeschools.

Our children have many friends. We have a great community of homeschoolers in our area. There are people of walks of life, races, religions, values and socioeconomic background. We all have the common interest in our childrens education. This has united us and there is a great support structure around us. We have noticed no difference in the educational commitment of those who register and those who do not. People do not register for many reasons. A major one is a lack of trust of the registration process. Some children have never been to school and others have and others will in the future.

#### Homeschoolers interacting.

We share ideas, resources and our own educational skills with each other. We have been in coops where one parent taught dancing, another drama and another art. There are many sporting groups such as gymnastics, soccer, basketball, swimming and tennis which we have been part of over the years.

One the great advantages is that we try to organise activities for multiple ages at once in the same venue. So in a current group we belong to, (with 100 children 10 minutes from my home) one child does choir, another drama, another theatre sports and the fourth dance and then they swap around. Homeschooling is not done in isolation or in the home. We employ people as needed to meet our childrens needs. The information pack released in August 2013 specified that school had to be done in the home in normal school hours. We know that experienced homeschoolers were given reduced registration periods of three months because they employed specialist teachers to teach music and didn't do it themselves. It was defined as extra curricular and not part of the teaching plan. We consider this policy to be completely against the educational interests of our children.

Bullying does not exist. Parents are proactive to address it and we have control of the social environment we put our children into. Children are also not judging each other based on academic achievement. Children with learning difficulties don't stand out from the crowd. Self esteem is higher because of that. Our son told us that to him homeschool children are different since they don't insult each other constantly and swear.

### Advantages.

Our children get taught more real world examples than school children. They have constant input into healthy eating, preparing meals, working with others to perform tasks and real life budgeting. We do more excursions too. When we were studying ecosystems we went to Kurnell with a local book on the myriad of ecosystems in Kurnell. We took photos and wrote a Keynote presentation on several ecosystems. This is engaging with learning in a way that schools can only dream of.

We have small class sizes, one on one tuition and can learn any time of the day or night. We are always looking for the opportunity to share our love of learning with our children. Our children embrace learning. We make sure that they have the opportunity to spend plenty of time on the things they love to learn and this leads them to excel and immerse themselves in their passions. When they were younger they were obsessed with dinosaurs and I wondered if they would ever learn anything else, but then it moved to insects and so on. Now we are more relaxed and as long as they are consistent in their English and Maths we often let them pursue their interests. Over a year they learn so much more in all the key learning areas than when we make them learn according to our agenda. Imagine... "Leave that experiment you are doing which you showed great initiative to pursue and instead learn what the book says comes next." We have realised it produces a better outcome to facilitate them learning what they want to know than forcing our agenda on them. We think the longer people homeschool the less schoolish it looks and the more confidence the parent is to let the children drive the learning.

Our children are often following the same topic. So we might all be learning about Ancient Egypt or conservation but at different levels. We try to expose them to people who have a passion about their area of knowledge. Our planning is always flexible because if an opportunity arises we take it.

The information pack of 2013 was too rigid. It did not allow for teaching topics outside the grade, multi-age learning or unit studies such as Ancient Egypt where maths, English, History, Geography, Human Society and its Environment and art could be taught around one topic. This year our children will learn about state parliament and inquiries because that is the opportunity that as a family we were presented with. They are learning how democracy works, visiting

Parliament House, meeting the local members and how to make a petition. Real life engagement in an issue that affects them. This is where true learning happens.

#### How and Why the system is broken.

The BOSTES has a focus on schools. The growth of home education is a threat to those who have studied for years to be a teacher. The BOSTES only employs teachers to administer homeschooling. This is different in other states. The Registrar of homeschooling at BOSTES also oversees the registration of independent schools. This has created, I think, an idea that home education is like a school and they are fundamentally different. The BOSTES is not really supportive of home education. They see themselves as regulators whose job it is to tick boxes. They are not interested in whether the children are getting a good education only in compliance with paperwork.

BOSTES does not communicate with home educators except to send them a letter reminding to reapply for registration. There is a weekly bulletin put out by BOSTES. It contains no reference to home educators. It did not announce the August 2013 pack or the several changes to the Question and Answers document. They do not consult with or inform the community in any way. This has created widespread confusion about the expectations of registration. Today I spoke to someone who planned to start homeschooling. She had seen the information pack. I had to tell her that the information pack is incorrect, since the Question and Answers contradict the information pack and make the information pack look like a joke. What

she really needs to do is read the Question and Answers to the Information pack and find an experienced homeschooler to help her understand what that means. How ridiculous! The refusal to withdraw the information pack causes new homeschoolers or those contemplating home education to waste time and resources and perhaps to overwhelmed with jargon. The BOSTES is not doing the right thing by home educators.

Even before the current pack was released there were new requests for outcomes to the syllabus to be recorded by some Authorised Persons but denial to the HEA that there were any changes. The HEA was unable to support home educators preparing for registration because the goal posts changed and no one told the players. We have seen numerous discussions on social media about the horror stories people experienced. Mums with suicidal children who had been removed from school because of bullying being threatened by Authorised Persons with return to school if they did not produce sufficient work. Instead these children needed support and counselling not maths or science. In 1998 the BOS tried to make very similar changes without any consultation. This is recorded in the parliamentary record. It reads just like now. They didn't consult and they planned changes which were detrimental to home educators.

The BOSTES has continued to deny that they have made any changes and state this was a minor revision. The HEA has been unable to consult since the BOSTES denied anything had changed. Yet the statistics revealed in the parliament show that numbers of reduced registrations and refused registrations have dramatically increased.

The homeschoolers wrote many letters to the Minister for Education complaining about their treatment and some even asking not to be forwarded to the Board of Studies which is after all our judge and jury. These letters were passed on and answered by the Board of Studies.

The current system is broken and a new system which supports home educators is needed. The trust in the BOSTES is severely damaged and clearly they are the wrong people for the job.

Many people turn to homeschooling because of a crisis in school. I have been a HEA support contact and received numerous calls from people needing to urgently remove their children from a dangerous environment. The BOSTES says it takes 3 months to register and the child must stay in school until the letter of registration is received. This does not work. There is no way they will send their child back and unnecessary anxiety is created about breaking the law to keep their children safe. This also opens the parent up to continual harrassment from the school they are leaving. There needs to be a process to support parents to access resources and to access the homeschool community to help them adjust to the sudden change. It should be a facilitated process to help the parent get started so as to benefit the child. If there is home visits they should be delayed for at least 3 months to give the parent the opportunity to find their feet. There needs to be empathy. No one choses this path lightly. It is a costly path for the mother and the family.

The change to the child protection laws so that unregistered homeschoolers could now be guilty of educational neglect has caused a lot of angst. There are many unregistered homeschoolers. I can't tell from the outside who they are since everyone is actively educating their kids. The system discourages registration. We regret registering because we no longer trust the BOSTES to have fair policies towards homeschoolers. We could not have kept homeschooling, the way we have, if we had had to do what the August 2013 pack required. (The question and answers has improved the situation temporarily.) The paperwork would have been oppressive and prohibitive without any improvement in quality. We would have been forced to change to a book only approach just to document the outcomes. We were planning to move states if we had

to escape the new system since now we am on their registration list it is hard to get off it without attracting attention.

### National Curriculum

I have some concerns about homeschoolers following the National Curriculum. Federal Labor wrote it, NSW wrote their own version and then Federal Liberal plan to rewrite it again. I think it is inappropriate that a curriculum is forced on public schools, private schools and homeschools when the content can be changed politically. If the curriculum starts to to differ from my values then I want the option to opt out. The current law allowing an exemption from registration still requires teaching the state syllabus. When the law was changed forcing homeschoolers to follow the state syllabus there was no consultation with homeschoolers. The law planned for private schools had homeschoolers added on at the last moment. I think there would have been huge opposition to this as evidenced by the Road Show the BOS went on to calm people down. One of the objections I have to the latest information pack was the inforcement of greater adherence to the syllabus content.

The Eltis report from 2003 recommended the Foundation or Stage Statements be written as plain language not EduSpeak so that parents and students could understand the syllabus. The report found that the educational speak of the outcomes was a mistake as even the teachers found it cumbersome and if it wasn't for the cost it should be rewritten in plain English. Yet fast forward less than a decade and NSW recommits down this path. They ignored their own research. Imposing eduspeak outcomes on home educators undermines the efforts of home

educators and in addition there was a redefinition of the minimum curriculum to be the entire curriculum.

### Travel and Registration

Travelling is a a great opportunity to enhance our childrens education. The Board of Studies policy has a narrow definition of home which does not include a travelling caravan. We have a friend travelling Australia whose children are getting a rich education yet she is not legally registered because NSW will not allow it. Instead they would want her to change to distance learning and disrupt her childrens education. This is unreasonable. The registration should not be linked to an address. Even coming to our home to check the lighting and workspaces is really not appropriate. If we were distance learning they wouldn't do that. We have never heard of anyone refused registration because they don't have a table or a light. If it is good enough to live in then it is good enough to educate in.

### Fixing the System

We consider the registration system to be inappropriate. The information pack was clearly written by people with poor understanding of home education. Then the BOSTES denied they had made any changes and due to our complaints wrote the Question and Answers which undid the worst of the changes. However their refusal to acknowledge the error or pull the original pack was based on pride rather than consultation. Their refusal to actively engage with home educators in writing the original pack shows a lack of regard for the interests of homeschoolers. We truly believe their goal

was to try to make it difficult for home educators and try to stem the tide of people leaving the school system.

Many home educators have had horrible experiences in the school system. They describe how their stress levels and their childrens happiness/health has improved with home education. Home education is a valid and legal alternative. The government should not be trying to hinder or discourage parents who chose this path. The loss of income, cost and responsibility is not taken lightly by any parent. There is no doubt home educators are extremely dedicated to their childrens education.

I favour a system which is not prescriptive on how children should be educated. I want to be able to chose curriculum and learning opportunities that best meets my childrens needs and interests. I don't want to be limited to following state curriculum. I certainly don't want to be teaching anything which is subject to politically change. I consider this to be an attempt at brainwashing.

Other states do not require home educators to follow the national curriculum. In Victoria a parent signs a letter taking responsibility for a childs education. The NSW law says the parent is responsible for the education of the child. If the child is sent to school they hand over that responsibility. I know I have responsibility to feed, dress and house my children and I don't have to sign taking responsibility for that. However maybe it absolves the governments responsibility to ensure that children get an opportunity for an education if the parent acknowledges that they are not handing this responsibility to the government.

In Tasmania they have a system that has operated effectively for 20 years. They also have high engagement rates. The system is supportive of home education not punitive as occurs in NSW. I think this model of support shows a greater regard for the best interests of the child. In NSW a child

is effectively punished because their parents chose to home educate or because the child's interests had not been served by the school system. This model is far preferable to what occurs in NSW.

We believe the current system is broken and a new system that supports parents in their decision is needed. We think that both the Victorian model and the Tasmanian model have merit. We would support removing all responsibility for registering home educators from the BOSTES and a new independent body being created which is separate from the school system.

There is plenty of evidence about the effectiveness of home education and no reason for unnecessary regulation. We need to ensure that any regulation is appropriate and evidence based, not created out of fear.

Thank you for reading our submission.