

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Ms Kellie Walsh

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Dear Committee

I am writing with regard to the parliamentary inquiry into Home Schooling in NSW.

I am a home educating parent of two children who are ten and seven years old. We have been home educating for just on four years. My eldest child attended Kindergarten and term one of Year One at our local public school. My son's experience at public school was mixed. Academically he was finding learning dull and boring (his words!) and was switching off learning and developing anxiety. When addressing this with the class teacher and principal the response was far from satisfactory – along the lines of there are not enough resources, we don't have any material age-appropriate to extend him etc.

However, the primary reason for withdrawing my child from school was his health. He had chronic asthma whilst at school – he had never experienced it before. He was hospitalised for over a week on his fifth birthday. Our family doctor believed that it could be in part due to the un-flued heaters in the classrooms. He also was in a classroom that at one stage had a gas leak and mould from a water leak that had been undetected. I raised the quality of the air with the Principal after my father mentioned he couldn't breathe well in the room after visiting for Grandparent's day (he has respiratory disease). The school did respond to this when I raised it. However, his teacher was not very happy about having to use a temporary classroom without her resources for a significant period of time whilst this was being addressed and made that very clear to me.

The decision to home educate was not an easy one – there are a lot of sacrifices especially financially. But having been doing it for some time now, it is clear to me that it is an education option for my children that works extremely well. My eldest has not had an asthma attack since leaving school. He is no longer so anxious. My youngest has not attended a school as we saw how well both children are doing learning at home. My children are both thriving. They are switched on, enthusiastic learners who are engaged with the world around them, absorbing it to the best of their capacity.

We are lucky to live in an area with a vibrant and engaged home schooling community and attend several weekly classes arranged by parents for the children across many age groups from babies to teens. We have a diverse range of presenters from the community who share skills, knowledge and information with the children. During school terms my kids enjoy classes with other home schooled children. This includes drama by a NIDA qualified actor, science club with a secondary science teacher, music and choir with Conservatory of Music qualified musicians, weekly learning events at our local community centre that are varied and interesting and go across the full range of key learning areas. We also have daily access to people and resources in our local community as well as the incredible wealth of information that is available on the Internet. They have access to learning

curricula such as the Khan Academy, StudyLadder, Reading Eggs and other various apps and online teaching programs. To top it off, they have a parent who has a fantastic ratio of one-to-two students who loves and knows her children, and has their absolute best interest at heart, resourcing them, learning with them and engaging with them in a way that a classroom teacher cannot. My teacher friends have told me that! We can go on field trips and enrichment activities, often joining other home schoolers in the city for a Symphony concert, play at the Opera House or talk at the Observatory. Or go down to Canberra during the week to go to Questacon (my son's favourite) or the National Gallery (my daughter's favourite). We can do volunteer work – my children's request – when other children may be at school such as bush care. They learn about engaging with their community, being part of it and doing something to benefit it.

We are a natural learning family and believe that children's learning is innate and if nurtured will flourish and this is definitely borne out over the last few years. My children learn from all facets of life, as do I! Key learning areas are easily covered by applying real life to skills learnt with day-to-day living. An engaged child and resourceful, available adult (or two) is an incredibly rich learning environment. I am particularly concerned with literacy and numeracy and we spend focused time on those daily as well as building on that with learning in day-to-day life. My children read or are read to every day and it is one of their favourite pastimes, along with many visits to the library!

As a home educating family, we focus on building healthy and positive relationships within our family and with our community of friends and home educating absolutely assists that. My children can have choice around relations and friendships they wish to develop outside the family which fosters wellbeing and emotional growth in a non-coercive, natural way. They have daily interactions with people from all walks of life in their community. They make friends easily and love and nurture the connections they have. They have friends that they skype with over the country that they share common passions and interests with.

We do not choose to participate in NAPLAN and I believe that increases undue anxiety for many kids. I have spoken to friends who are teachers who are very alarmed at the misplaced emphasis on testing and teaching to tests. We believe that education is a whole of life experience and that nurturing the whole child/person who loves to learn and will continue to want to learn, is a human being who will contribute greatly to our society.

Due to home educating we have had to make choices about income and lifestyle. I am forgoing an income, along with superannuation and the social benefits, to be at home for my children as I believe it is currently their best educational choice. This is not an easy decision and we have had to forgo a lot of what my peers and friends with dual incomes take for granted. The investment I am making with time whilst forgoing a more affluent lifestyle for my children's education is an important and

cherished choice. This makes home education as one of the most expensive of all types of education that my family could choose. The government saves by my children not being in the government system.

I would like to point out that my experiences with the Authorised Person from the BOSTES has been very positive so far – I have another visit next week having completed our last two year registration period. I have felt that my AP was collaborative, helpful and supportive of our education choice. She has assisted me with different things that could help with home education and recording our progress. We are lucky. Having said that, however, I did find preparing for this upcoming visit much more onerous since the changes to the Information Pack. I found it more stressful and anxiety provoking and felt it more prescriptive and difficult to satisfy the requirements even though I feel my children are doing very well with their learning. I wrote an extensive report (way more thorough than I have ever seen from a school teacher) of 25 pages for each child outlining how we met each outcome for the stages of the NSW curriculum each of my children are at. I also spent much time preparing my program of learning for the next period of registration and ensuring samples of the children's work are available. I have resources available to be reviewed on request.

I am particularly alarmed by the changes described in the 2013 Handbook for Authorised Persons, *"Registration for home schooling requires that the educational program be delivered in the registered child's home. In assessing an application for home schooling registration, an Authorised Person must be satisfied that the education of the child, as required for registration, including for all key learning areas, will occur in the home."* Our learning occurs both inside and outside the home. We attend many classes, activities and indeed just learning by living outside the home. We have incredibly rich experiences travelling and learning in the field about history, science and many other learning areas. I understand that the BoSTES has since backed away from this requirement but it underlines their lack of understanding of home education and their lack of consultation with home educators. I understand that the BoSTES still refuses to register families who are travelling for more than the school holidays, which again shows their ignorance of the types of environments within which home education can successfully occur. We travelled to visit family overseas last year and the children were saturated with learning by travelling to another country and all the enrichment that brings some of which cannot be quantified.

The most challenging part of home schooling for me is the lack of greater societal support, ignorance and assumptions around home schooling. I would love for home education to be seen as a valid and indeed a very rich educational choice for Australian children should parents choose it. I support appropriate regulation and indeed consider some checking in process a positive experience. I love reflecting back on what we have done and sharing that with my AP! I do however feel that it has swung to being very difficult and onerous and not-in-sync with home educating principles of learning.

I consider myself to be a facilitator of my children's learning. I resource them, listen to them, engage them and encourage them. I learn alongside them. The richness and depth of this relationship and to the learning experience for them cannot be overstated. It is extremely satisfying watching my children thrive, work through their struggles and engage with their community and friends. People often comment to me how they are interesting to be with, emotionally intelligent, alert and available to learn.

Thank you for reading my submission. I am a passionate advocate for home education because I see how it works for my children. Of course it is for everyone, but those parents/carers who make this choice I believe should be supported and seen for the incredible, wholehearted work that we are doing for our children and indeed, dare I say it, for our society as a whole.

Kellie Walsh

8 August 2014