

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

**Name:** Ms Stephanie Hayes

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Partially Confidential

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**For the LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY**

My name is Stephanie Hayes. I am a secular home educator of my 12 year old son , living on the Central Coast of NSW. I very much appreciate the opportunity to address this Inquiry about home education, and feel grateful for the work that you are doing in facilitating this Inquiry for our community.

I would like to address the following terms of reference:

***(a) The background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand.***

There are some very positive regulatory practices throughout Australia and New Zealand in relation to home education. I feel that NSW would do well to adapt the Tasmanian model, whereby home educators are given a 6 month probationary period as soon as they make the choice to home educate; and the department of Education employ registration staff who have direct home education experience. These two practices allow for families to find their feet without the added immediate pressures of inspection and registration while they do so, which is especially helpful if schooling has been a traumatic experience and your child needs a period of respite and recovery. The practice of employing staff with direct home education experience is crucial for home educators I feel. We have such a unique educative experience that it is very difficult for institutionally based AP's to relate to us, and to understand the broad holistic contexts, structures, practicalities and practices of home education. Finally, within New Zealand's model of home education parents are given a small yearly financial payment to educate their children, in recognition of the costs they bear in doing this work. This too is something that I would like to see NSW adopt, as even private schools are partly subsidised to educate children, and we as home educators bear the cost burden alone. I feel that giving us a small financial subsidy or payment towards bearing the cost of educating at home would be a great help and encouragement.

***(b) The current context of home schooling in NSW including:***

***(ii) financial costs***

As already stated above, home educators bear the costs of education themselves when all other education types are at least partly funded in Australia. There is always much discussion from regulators about the importance of high quality education for children in Australia, which I agree with. Regulators could help achieve a higher level of quality education for home educated children by providing equity of funding on par with private schools, thus enabling parents to provide more resources for their children's education experiences. Also, there is a problem relating to Centrelink payments for home educated children (of low income families) once they turn 16. Centrelink does not recognise registered home education as a valid educational endeavour in regards to Youth Allowance. This is a very unfair situation, considering that registered home educated children are legally recognised under both Federal and State legislation. This issue will directly affect my family as we are a low income single parent household and will make things very difficult.

***(iii) Demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children***

originally attend the same school as his older brother (for 2 1/2 years), from kindergarten to mid-way through Year 2. He entered the school system a very happy, confident, gregarious child who had loving relationships with his family members. However, during his time at school he encountered several problems that made life very stressful and upsetting for him, and eventually he became sick, anxious, disconnected and distressed almost all of the time. These challenges included:

**Learning difficulties:**        was unable to focus, concentrate or learn almost anything in the classroom environment. His teacher was unable to tell me why he could not absorb much learning, only that he was incredibly distracted, could not focus on most tasks and could not seem to retain information. Once I took my son out of school I realised that the problem was much worse than I had at first realised. I discovered that        suffers from severe dyslexia and dyscalculia, which is why he was simply drowning in the classroom. Scientific research shows that people with dyslexia must work 10 times harder than non-dyslexics in order to process the same information, and the above problems in school are all too common for them – and people with dyslexia require extra time in a quiet environment to allow their brains to process and learn effectively (Eide & Eide, 2012). This kind of learning environment cannot be provided for my son in a modern, naturally noisy, fast paced classroom – he simply cannot learn effectively in that kind of environment.

**Social isolation & Bullying:**        was ostracised by his fellow class mates for the entire time he was at school. He entered school as a happy child, and by the time he left, his self-esteem had plummeted, his confidence was completely destroyed, and he felt so fearful that he would

never have any friends, due to his social experience with other children at school. He was also systematically bullied the entire time he was at school by a number of boys, but very severely by one boy in particular. Despite repeated contact with various teachers and administration over this issue, the bullying was never properly addressed, and to a large degree was ignored. The bullying increased over time, and in his final 6 months at school it became a daily occurrence. My son was sick with dread (both physically and emotionally) leaving for school every day.

Due to this combination of factors,        became anxiety ridden, had nightmares regularly, felt sick constantly (he also succumbed to many general viral illnesses due to his lowered immune system because of high stress levels), and in the final few months he was at school, he also began to self-harm. He literally became like a different child, withdrawn, depressed, anxious and frustrated – he could not understand why he had to endure it, and became emotionally distant. It was absolutely heartbreaking and frightening to watch.

***(v) characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children, and (vi) comparison of home schooling to school education including distance education,***

When I began home educating my child, he was in a very vulnerable state and incredibly traumatised from his time at school. The emotional impact of this was catastrophic, and for the first 6 months he was not able to take in much 'learning and education' in the mainstream sense - what he needed was a lot of time in a calm, quiet, secure environment where all his needs could be met, where he could be comforted, where he could re-learn trust in the adults around him (and know that we were there to take care of his needs and protect him), and where he could begin to heal without the pressure to work and learn intensely. Very slowly his heightened state of anxiety, fear and trauma receded, and within a year of home schooling, my son had some of his confidence back, he was healthy and well most of the time, he had re-bonded with me, and he was mostly back to his old gregarious smiling self. At around the 6 month point he was able to start really learning, and it was successful, despite his learning disabilities.

Because of his learning disabilities, I have learnt over time that the main priority must be to *teach in a way that caters to his needs*. Experience has shown me that this is the only way that he can actually learn - it has to be specifically tailored, and cannot be confined to a regimented system. I must allow        he flexibility to explore all kinds of ways of learning and not be rigid in my delivery (eg. I cannot teach to specified outcomes – it does not work for my child). *It was only due to the fact that I was given a long initial registration period, and was not under pressure to fulfil needless bureaucratic requirements and show immediate results, that I was able to provide        with the necessary environmental conditions to recover and begin to learn successfully.*

The tailored, eclectic home education approach has worked wonders for – 5 years later and he is now thriving and continually improving and learning across all domains. His social contact and friendships are also very positive and enjoyable now - within the home schooling community my son has developed many good friends and is deeply satisfied with this social situation. His fellow home school kids have accepted him as he is - he is free to be himself at last.

also has a very rich educational experience outside of the home, and participates in many group activities with other home educators and in various activities and venues. Here is a brief list of home education activities that my son participates in:

- Excursions to various places throughout the year based on what we are learning at home (example for this term would be the study of Ancient Rome, and we are travelling down to Parramatta to watch a Roman Soldier re-enactment group in action).
- Workshops in science, theatre, electronics, Indigenous cultural exchange, technology etc.
- Classes at local high schools in performing arts, science, photography, metal and wood work etc.
- Attendance at theatrical performances.
- Participation in community theatre.
- Joining volunteer organisations with parents and performing voluntary work.
- Tuition by specialists such as artists, writers, musicians, singers, mathematicians etc.
- Sports such as ice skating during the autumn and winter months, soccer and football, surfing, martial arts etc.

These combined aspects of home schooling, physical, emotional, social, psychological and educational, have made a huge difference my son's life. All in all, home education is a perfect fit for him, as it gives him the extra time, the quiet environment and the space that he needs to learn the things that challenge him due to his learning disabilities, but he also has the incredible social benefits of being embedded within a home schooling community and the broader community that welcome him and allow him to develop into a well-rounded, well educated, emotionally stable human being. Importantly, there is no bullying and no trauma. Furthermore, I absolutely believe that regardless of the level of funding for schools in relation to disabilities, my son's learning challenges cannot be catered and tailored to his needs as perfectly as they are through home education. I know my son's needs to such a specific degree and have it within my power to accommodate them very well. I have seen my son operate within both environments, and I know which one is more successful in meeting his unique needs.

***(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including, (i) current registration processes and ways of reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers, (ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons, and (iii) adherence to delivery of the New South Wales Syllabuses & (e) representation of home schoolers within Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES).***

The government, and BOSTES, express concern about the issue of home educators' adherence to the NSW Syllabuses - the release of guidelines for home education last year, as well as personal experience with registration, all point to the fact that bureaucracy, reporting and syllabus outcomes are all increasing exponentially in NSW.

I personally am not satisfied with this current registration process.

Our government legislation (and the United Nations) mandate that the education of children is primarily the jurisdiction of parents. Home educating parents are in full agreement with this mandate, willing and able to do the job required, but we need to be given the trust, the respect and the freedom to implement our children's education the way they need it delivered. Over the past 5 years that I have been home schooling, every home educating parent I have met (too numerous to count) has endeavoured to make their learning environment as child-centric and as rich and wonderful as possible.

I have now been through 3 registrations for home educating: 2 interviews and 1 registration by documentation. I have been successful on all occasions, being given the maximum time for each period. The first registration interview was very relaxed. The AP response was professional yet friendly, encouraging, positive, curious and embracing of all that home education had to offer, specifically about tailoring an individual program to meet my son's unique personal and educational needs. However, my most recent application, my third, was much more formal; and much more stringent and directive. It was clearly communicated that the inspection was for the main purpose of complying with BOSTES policy requirements; there was much emphasis placed on the recording of information about outcomes (many of which my son is unable to meet on a regular basis due to his specific challenges); and within this context there was a definite decline in the recognition and allowance for meeting my son's specific needs as well as a clear lack of understanding regarding his learning situation.

An example I can provide you relates to my son's writing. As stated, he suffers from dyslexia, and he has great difficulty with both the focus required to write at length, to form complex sentences, as well as the necessary dexterity to write well. A previous AP was very supportive of completing the amount of writing that was conducive to him learning, but not to the level where he would become distressed and unable to focus and learn (he was supportive of us supplementing his writing with other modes of expression, such as audio & visual presentations, illustrations, maps, etc...).

But the most recent AP who conducted our registration interview, a BOSTES inspector, expressed to us (both him and I directly) that he must do much more writing across all subject areas, indicating that his current level was not sufficient under the policy guidelines. I did restate to the AP that my son had learning difficulties that made it extremely challenging for him to write at length. The AP seemed completely unfazed by this information, and she continued to give instructions that he should then write using the keyboard instead. The AP said that she would be making a note of this, and that the next inspector would need to see evidence of this. The inference being (although not explicitly stated), that our successful ongoing registration would be contingent upon his ability to write more. At that point in the registration interview, I felt unable to further challenge the AP because I was afraid of not being given registration. Also, the communication on this matter by the AP clearly demonstrated to me that she was dismally qualified to assess my sons' educational needs in relation to this particular learning disability – if she had understood the challenges of dyslexia she would have known that it occurs across a broad spectrum, and for children like my son, who is profoundly affected, even working on a keyboard is very challenging due to the issues related to processing information and working memory in the brain (Eide & Eide, 2012). Moreover, I have subsequently discovered that this AP was overstepping her jurisdiction with this directive, as the legislation states that AP's can only recommend these kinds of things, not insist upon them.

and I both replied that we would try to facilitate this for the AP: we felt we had no other choice at that moment. However, given my son's previous schooling trauma, this whole exchange made him feel very anxious and stressed for at least a few weeks after the meeting. It was also very stressful for me as I felt fearful for a while that he may have to go back into a school environment where he finds it impossible to learn (until I learned that the AP did not have the right to make this demand). So these new requirements and emphases on outcome reporting and bureaucratic box ticking are very personally stressful and unwelcome to me as a home educator. To this very day I still experience periods of anxiety about my next registration (which is next year) related to the increasing rigidity of AP requirements that are not conducive to learning needs.

Furthermore, these new requirements make life so much more difficult in that I am now expected to teach to a range of specific outcomes which my child constantly struggles to meet due to his learning style and difficulties, and yet I must also teach him in all of the alternative ways that actually do work for him (in order for him to actually learn), hence if I submit to BOSTES requirements, it takes double the teaching time due to having to try and work between two competing systems. I think that in NSW, after 2 successful registrations, parents should be left to get on with the job, and not have to endure any further registrations. They offer no benefit whatsoever to home educating families, do not contribute to improving education quality for home schooled children, and present only stress and pressure for at least a month in advance for parents, whose home education quality may suffer during that time accordingly.

The Education Act of 1990 places the responsibility of education with myself, the parent, while the State has a duty to ensure that the education I implement is of high quality. I contend that BOSTES should be focused on assessing the **quality** of the education that I provide for my son (as my first two registrations did), not on demanding burdensome procedural reporting and excessive regulation. I must also stress how imperative it is that AP's are properly trained in all of the various special needs that children may have, in order to provide a positive registration experience for home educated children and parents, instead of causing needless stress and suffering.

As a home educating parent, I am deeply committed to the education, health, wellbeing and happiness of my child which I see as interconnected parts of a whole. Every day I do everything in my power to provide him with the best opportunities to facilitate this, and most importantly, in a way that is **accessible** to him. I have witnessed firsthand how his learning improves and declines, based on whether or not his learning needs are being met, on a multitude of levels. I also know that when my son was at school, his teachers were applying all of these specified outcomes generally to his whole class, but he was just unable to meet them, and he was left behind and learnt nothing. If I had left him in that system, the department of education would not take any responsibility for the fact that my son was not able to fit that system or meet those outcomes and my son's life chances would have been very negatively affected. Yet as a home educator I am now expected to teach my child according to this same 'one size fits all' set of measures, and potentially be refused registration if I fail to do so, despite the fact that the education system I use for my son is far more effective for him than schooling was, and he is learning and thriving across all domains.

Changes in policy have been implemented with no consultation with our community. BOSTES are asking home educators to invest vastly increased efforts in time and energy to comply with policies that provide no evidence for any improvement in the education of our children, and end up taking away from actual teaching time. These policy changes seem to indicate that BOSTES has little understanding of the way in which home education works. I feel it would be very beneficial for BOSTES to not only consult with the home education community on this matter, but to invite a home education representative into a consultative role, just as there are representatives for public and private education on the board now. As intrinsic community stake holders in this matter, surely we have a right to consultation and representation?

I also feel that BOSTES should not be treating home educators with the underlying assumption and suspicion that we are abusing and neglecting our children. I argue that the whole process of registration is so open and clear, we open our homes to AP's and subject ourselves to a vetting process, that people like myself who are undertaking this procedure are very clearly **not** in the business of child abuse. The combination of all of these things makes me very tempted to either move States, and makes me envious of those who have decided to become unregistered.



***(c) support issues for home schooling families and barriers to accessing support***

Another matter of concern to me as a home educator is the lack of equity between home educated children and children who attend school. Egalitarianism is a foundational basis of our society, yet there seems to be punitive measures in place which prevent home educated children from participating in educational programs that all other children have access to.

Home educated children have no eligibility to:

- Participate in TVET courses at TAFE like other high school children do.
- No ability to participate in educational programs whilst in extended hospital stays, like school children do.
- No ability to access Open High School distance education language programs like school children do (which even children from Papua New Guinea may do!).
- Home educated students in other states can be enrolled part-time enrolled in school and have access to sports programs, debating teams etc.
- Home educated children with disabilities are being refused access to resources available to children in schools.

It would be wonderful if the Inquiry could recommend more equitable access to education services for our home educated children, which would ensure even more educational opportunities for them, equivalent to their peers.

***(f) Other matters to consider.***

When I first began home educating it was out of a sense of desperation. My main aims were to ensure my son's emotional and physical wellbeing by removing him from a harmful environment; to teach him to read; and to get him to a point of overall stability. I estimated that this would take about 2 years and that he would then be able to return to another school and resume a mainstream education. However, by the end of the two year period had no desire to go back to school, my perspective and philosophy on home education had drastically altered, and I knew that it was the best way forward for my child. My son still does not want to attend school, not only because he was severely traumatised by the experience, but because a) he enjoys home education immensely, b) he is able to learn and participate in more specialised activities that are uniquely suited to him, c) he knows that the kind of extended time frames that he needs to accomplish his work, and the very specific ways that he learns, would probably not be able to be facilitated for him at school, d) he loves the social and community aspect of home school. and I both have a much more holistic way of viewing education these days, and learning is something that is intrinsic to our everyday experiences. Basically, learning is built into every aspect of our lives, every activity that we undertake, and is always occurring.

At this point in education, at the age of 12 (almost 13), is deeply interested in both the care of animals, and in participation in our local community theatre. Over the past 3 years has participated in 3 local community theatre productions, and is about to audition for his 4<sup>th</sup>. Preparation, rehearsals and performances combined can take up to 6 months in total and require a high level of energy, stamina, commitment and confidence, which has in abundance now. Further, is planning on getting a local part-time job as soon as he can in order to fund the voluntary care of injured wildlife as an active member of Wildlife Ark here on the Coast. In the meantime he rescues injured animals and strays in our neighbourhood, and is also making plans to do work experience at Taronga Zoo when he is older. I feel that would not have been able to accomplish this (or even dream of it) over the past few years without the resilience that he has gained through home education.

Another point I want to share with you is the very subtle but powerful ways in which home education benefits our family:

When I look back to my own mainstream education and experience, although I did not suffer from learning disabilities or extreme bullying like did, I feel that the combination of schooling and having two parents who worked full time, eventually led to a feeling of emotional separation and a stunting of communication and cohesion between us, especially during my teens. Peer pressure was also very high at school, and the combination of these things led to some very negative social and emotional outcomes for me as a teen. It took many years to make a full recovery.

In contrast, my son (who lost his emotional connection to us very early on due to the trauma he suffered at school) has now regained all of his positive communication skills and his closeness in relationship to his family members, and has a happy balance between peer and family relationships. He also does not suffer the extremes of peer pressure and there is a real sense of emotional stability within him. I have observed over the past 5 years a very similar dynamic in other home educating families, whereby teens enjoy close, stable and positive relationships with their family and friends throughout this normally turbulent time. I feel therefore that home education offers more than just educative benefits alone.

Finally, choosing home education also requires many personal sacrifices of parents in terms of time and money. For example, I am a single parent (although not by choice), and when my son was in Year 1 at school I enrolled in a university degree in order to increase my skills, enhance my employment opportunities and contribute to the community via more meaningful work. However, because of deteriorating circumstances at school, I felt that I needed to home educate him - hence my university degree is being completed at a very slow pace, and has so far taken me 8 years. This has had the knock on effect of drastically affecting my earnings over the past 5 years. Even given all of these sacrifices, I still feel that home educating my child is worth it. His formative years are finite but they affect his life chances, opportunities and emotional and mental health for the remainder of his entire life. But I think it is important that you understand the extra sacrifices that are required of parents in order to facilitate this type of education for our children.

In closing, I thank you all very much for your time in reading about my family's home educating experience. I very much appreciate it, and I look forward with great interest to learning of your recommended outcomes in November.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Hayes

*Reference*

*Eide, B. & Eide F. 2012, The Dyslexic Advantage, Penguin Books, London, UK.*