

**Submission
No 77**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Mrs Amy Butler

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Adrian and Amy Butler

THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ON HOMESCHOOLING INQUIRY

We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the inquiry on homeschooling. At the outset we would like to state that the term ‘homeschooling’ is in itself misleading. It gives the impression that what we are talking about is ‘school at home’, where in fact what happens in our family is ‘home-based education’, where living and learning are blended and can take place in many and varied contexts and environments. One of its best strengths is the flexibility homeschooling offers to tailor a child’s education to cater for their particular needs and interests. Our home school journey of four years to date has been full of excitement, discovery, relational closeness with our children and the sharing of the learning adventure together.

We thank you for your time in considering our comments on the following Terms of Reference.

(b) i Outcomes of home schooling including in relation to transition to further study and work:

It is our understanding that no comprehensive research has yet been undertaken in Australia to determine the academic and transition to further study and work outcomes for homeschooling. However, research in the United States suggests that comparisons in standardised testing indicate that home schooled students perform as well, if not at a higher average, than their traditionally schooled counterparts.¹

We would suggest that whether a child is educated in a public, private or home school setting, the involvement of parents in a child’s education is of great significance towards a child’s academic success and transition to further study or work. The choice a family makes to home educate their children indicates their commitment to their children’s education. As homeschooling parents, we are only too aware of the demands of such an educational choice. Home education is not a choice that can be undertaken without deep conviction and commitment to providing a quality education for our children.

Part of our ongoing job as home school parents is to assess our children’s academic progress. Through comparisons with NSW syllabus work samples and the aims and outcomes provided, we are confident that our children are working at or above State standards.

¹ <http://www.hslda.org/docs/news/200908100.asp>

(b) ii Financial Costs:

Homeschooling is arguably the most expensive form of education possible given that it requires one parent (or both parents part time) to forego an income in order to provide their children's education. In our case my husband supports our family of four children on one income in order that I am able to stay at home to educate and care for our children (two primary and two preschool aged).

In addition to the foregoing of an income there are the costs incurred in purchasing curriculum, resources, materials, quality books, various forms of private or group tuition (eg music, ballet, sports), field trips etc. If we were to judge quality of education by the amount of money spent on each child's education, I believe homeschooling would be comparable to the most expensive private school fees in the State.

It is equally important to note that this growing body of homeschoolers is lifting the financial burden of education from the State. A NSW Education and Communities report revealed the following figures;

Primary students – spend in the classroom

In 2009/10, NSW spent \$12,540 per full-time primary student in the classroom. In 2009/10, NSW provided \$1,506 more per student than Victoria (the second largest public education system in Australia).

Secondary students – spend in the classroom

In 2009/10, NSW spent \$15,136 per full-time secondary student in the classroom. In 2009/10 NSW provided \$1,012 more per student than Victoria.²

In a political climate where government is looking to reduce public spending largely through privatisation and contracting strategies, surely homeschooling is a movement which makes economic sense to embrace. In home educating our four children (once the younger are also registered) we are effectively saving the State Government over \$50,000 per annum.

Incidentally, we are concerned that the costs incurred by such an arduous registration process, including the number of follow up visits by APs due to an increasing number of shorter registration periods granted, is a misallocation of funds. A streamlining of the registration process would allow funds to be reallocated where needed such as providing genuine support for homeschoolers through existing support structures such as the Home Education Association.

² <https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/about-us/statistics-and-research/key-statistics-and-reports/financial-information/education-cost.pdf>

As a family we do not seek financial support from the Government. But we do seek recognition of the economic benefits of homeschooling for the State being translated into a more collaborative and supportive registration process. This will be discussed further in point (c) vi.

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

As I'm sure you are aware, the number of registered home-schooled students has been steadily on the increase. Figures show that the number of students registered has risen by 44% in the last five years.³ For a broad range of reasons, our view is that the number of families who embrace homeschooling as a genuine 'third way' educational choice will continue to increase. These families would very much appreciate a government regime which shows understanding and support of their endeavours.

Our journey into homeschooling began several years before we had children through meeting a number of home school graduates at a tertiary residential college where we were employed as youth workers. We were impressed by their maturity, responsibility and ability to relate both to their peers and people of different age groups.

My husband has a Bachelor of Science, a Master of Education and an Associate Degree in Civil Engineering. I completed a Bachelor of Arts in Communications and we studied together for a year each obtaining a Graduate Diploma of Bible and Ministry. We both received our primary and secondary schooling in public schools and enrolled our eldest child into the local public school, where my husband had worked, before deciding to home school. We made our final decision to home school in the week before school began so none of our children have ever attended formal school.

The point we want to make is that we are not 'anti-school'. We are pro-education and are both very grateful for the education we received through public schools. We did not remove our children from school because of special needs, bullying or bad experiences, although we recognise that many home school parents have had to take such measures. Rather, from the outset we embraced homeschooling as a genuine educational choice which has proven to be a very rewarding choice both for us and our children. Our oldest children who are currently registered (9 & 6) both articulate their appreciation for the opportunity to be educated at home.

As we have interacted with the homeschooling community in our local area and more broadly through the HEA, web forums and wide reading of home school practices and philosophies, we have discovered the home school community to be rich and diverse.

(b) vi Comparison of homeschooling to school education including distance education:

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[http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/key/HomeEducationinNSW/\\$File/Home+schooling+GG+3.pdf#page5](http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/publications.nsf/key/HomeEducationinNSW/$File/Home+schooling+GG+3.pdf#page5)

As previously mentioned we believe home school is a misleading label for what effectively happens in our home. Rather, we see our 'home school' as an all encompassing life style choice where life and learning are blended.

Like many other home school families I know, we have a designated 'school time' each morning when the children (and mother) are fresh and alert. During these times we do what I call our 'seat work' which is where we concentrate on our English and Mathematics. After this period we read widely from selected books (fiction and non-fiction) to cover the other essential KLAs. We also have 'project time' where the children are provided with materials, time and encouragement to pursue their own projects. If I were to document all our learning activities each day our 'school' extends far beyond the traditional 9-3 regime usually associated with traditional learning.

While my husband's teaching degree has been helpful in providing a springboard for us to get our 'home school' underway we have also read widely on home education philosophy and have been influenced by a number of home school methods such as Charlotte Mason and Classical Education. We intentionally steered away from purchasing curriculum packages opting instead to feel our way and see what would work for each child rather than being locked into curriculum choices. As a 'non-teacher' I have found it helpful and reassuring to have my husband share the realities of classroom education as a comparison along the way.

My husband's observation between the classroom and the home environment is that homeschooling offers a one-to-one model of teaching. In a classroom environment there is one 'expert' speaker/writer/reader etc, to share between thirty children where in the home environment the child (or children) receives one-on-one attention from that 'expert' speaker/writer/reader etc. In a classroom, as much as a teacher may try to cater for individual needs, the syllabus must be covered in a certain time frame, so that some students miss out on the extension they require while others are simply left behind. Because parent and child work side by side in the home school environment the parent is constantly able to assess their child's understanding, capabilities and interests thus pitching lesson work appropriately for that child's precise needs.

I have attached as an appendix, an outline of our family's personalised approach to home-based education.

(c) iii adherence to delivery of the NSW syllabuses

I spent a number of weeks at the beginning of this year familiarising myself with the new syllabus. We have always used the NSW syllabus as a springboard for our planning of the academic year. We also review the children's progress along the way in light of the NSW syllabus.

The home education setting should allow for a broad interpretation of the syllabus documents. Much of the content, particularly in the early years with which I am familiar, follow a natural course. Reading a familiar fairy tale to a five year old,

asking questions, having them answer, role-play and draw their responses covers a gamut of syllabus outcomes.

I do not find it necessary (nor has my Authorised Person) to provide a 'text book' for certain subjects such as they may in school. Certain areas of PDHPE are covered, for example, in modelling a healthy life style, talking about the five food groups at dinner time and participating in local sporting clubs.

As we participate in our community through national celebrations, interacting with our neighbours, welcoming newcomers from different cultures etc our children are learning the core values enshrined in the HSIE syllabus. We also look at broader issues and world history which may not necessarily be the focus for a HSIE program in school.

In summary, I find the syllabus documents helpful as a guide but strongly disagree with the way the current Information Package seeks to enforce the way they are interpreted, taught and reported upon.

(c) vi appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved & ii training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons.

When I first embarked on our home school journey, I had to break out of the 'school at home' mode of thinking. Based on my own educational experience and my husband's teaching profession, it was the only model with which we were familiar. It is certainly one approach to homeschooling but not the only one. The emphasis of the current Information Package is very inflexible in the delivery of a home-based education. It rests entirely on a 'school at home' approach. This does not sit well with the home education community, nor does it ensure that a quality education is delivered to registered home school students. The pressure the BoSTES places on home school families to conform to the delivery of a rigid syllabus I believe goes beyond the scope of the Education Act. It also demonstrates the lack of understanding of the diversity and broadness of home school practices.

Home school parents are much more concerned about the individual needs of their children than making sure that the program they deliver is in exact alignment with the NSW syllabus. This is as it should be. The strength of homeschooling rests in the individual nature of each program to ensure that children are receiving an education of a high quality suited to that student's needs and interests. The current registration process takes away from a family's focus on delivering a quality education. Instead it distracts parents who are instead worried about making sure their paper work is going to be adequate to meet the current registration requirements.

There is no support for home school families inbuilt into the current registration process. On a personal note, to me registration feels like I am doing something which is disapproved of by the State, but which they condescend to give me permission to do *if* I am able to prove myself, by their terms. This is not the impression given in the

Education Act which treats homeschooling as one of three valid education choices. A child's education is after all, the responsibility of the parent⁴.

The process of registration is inefficient. In the Central West, for example, APs are required to travel great distances and the inflexibility of registration requirements means that unnecessary visits are often made. For example, the unwillingness of the BoTES to register a child of 5 and a half at the same time as her brother 7 because she was not yet six thus requiring a follow up visit less than six months later. Every time a shorter registration period is granted – for reasons which are not even presented in writing – an extra visit is required. This is surely a waste of resources which could be put into a more collaborative and supportive registration process.

The current Information Package caused so many concerns that an ensuing Question and Answer package was released. For many home school parents this made the process even more daunting as there are two documents to consult. Which one sets the standard? It has been my experience that regardless of what the documents say, the experience of the registration process rests in the *personality and attitude of the Authorised Person*.

The Authorised Person can make or break a family's experience of the registration process. Their outlook, positive or negative, on homeschooling is instrumental in whether a family receives recommendation for registration. It is essential that a representative from the home school community should be involved in the recruitment and training of Authorised Persons. APs should also be able to demonstrate, as part of essential criteria, experience in or understanding of the broad scope of home school philosophies and practices.

CONCLUSION

As a family we are pro education and we are pro education choice. For the time being home school is the educational choice we have made for our children. As a growing community, we believe that homeschoolers are looking for a government which supports homeschooling as a genuine educational choice. We trust that the outcome of this inquiry will be a growing acceptance within government and the community of home education. We also hope that the current registration process will be reconsidered with the aim of creating a process of registration which is both collaborative and supportive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Immediate withdrawal of the August 2013 Information Package
- Interim registration granted to families who are withdrawing their children from damaging situations in schools while the formal registration process takes place
- Consultation to take place between the Minister of Education and Home School representatives (HEA) on a more adequate registration process

⁴ http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/ea1990104/s4.html

- The consideration of a system similar to Tasmania of an independent board comprising of experienced educators, including home educators, accountable to the Minister to oversee Home school registration.
- Removal of current discrimination issues such as access to hospital schools, travel passes, TAFE courses, part time school enrolment etc.

Adrian & Amy Butler

APPENDIX

ENVIRONMENT: *The first step towards an effective home based education is to create a conducive learning environment.*

This of course includes the physical learning environment of the home. But in a much bigger sense it includes creating a place of emotional security for a child who then has the confidence to question, make mistakes, learn and grow. It starts in early childhood through reading, talking, singing etc. We 'litter' our home with quality literature, art supplies, a rich outdoor environment including pets. We also embrace our community as a learning environment with regular trips to the library, pool, church, sports groups, home school group etc. We take regular family 'field trips' where we spend time with our extended family as part of giving our children a sense of their heritage along with visiting different parts of our country and viewing museums etc. Our home school environment is based in the home but incorporates all of life and the world around us.

ENGAGE: *Once a learning environment is created a child will naturally be engaged in the world around them leading to a desire to learn.*

We have witnessed this in our children who were asking questions and were thirsty not only for knowledge but the ability to find out answers for themselves. One of our children started reading signs around the town before they had commenced 'formal reading lessons'. Another child went ahead leaps and bounds in her reading when she discovered animal encyclopaedias and wanted to find out what the pictures were about so she just ***had*** to read for herself.

EQUIP : *The aim of any good education should be to see children become self learners.*

Our oldest child is working at a year 3 level and our second child commenced formal 'kindergarten' this year. The most concerted effort has been made so far to equip our children with the necessary skills to become self motivated learners. The rudimentary studies of reading, writing and arithmetic have been our focus in order that as they move along the grades they will have the necessary skills to both discern and disseminate information, to ask their own questions and have the research skills to find the answers, for them to have the qualifications to pursue any avenue of further work or study their interest takes them. Part of equipping our children includes ensuring that they have a positive attitude towards learning along with the self-discipline to carry their projects and ambitions through.

ENRICH & EXTEND: *The world is their oyster!*

Once our children have achieved a level of independence in their learning we continue to feed them materials and experiences to enrich and extend their education in order that they receive a taste for the variety of learning avenues they may wish to pursue. We also assess them on their interests and talents and extend them in these areas with a view to guiding them into tertiary studies or a career path. This will enable them to be a self supporting adult who is able to make a positive contribution to society both in the personal and professional spheres.