

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date received:** 14/07/2014

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Partially Confidential

(b) the current context of home schooling in New South Wales:

I have been homeschooling my eldest daughter for a year, and my middle two for one term (my youngest is in preschool, and joins in as appropriate), though I have been reading to them all for at least 45 minutes every night, and it is common for story time to exceed an hour and a half. Additionally, we have subscribed to the online phonics program *Reading Eggs* during their pre-school and early school years. My children have done well at school. My eldest was one of the two chosen in her class to compete in public speaking against the rest of her stage, though her school reports stated she could participate more in class discussions. My observations of her socially were that she was shy, and rarely answered when an adult spoke to her. After homeschooling her for six months, I observed that she would respond fifty percent of the time without being prompted by me, and this figure has continued to increase. My third child is happy and active. She was at school for a year and one term before we began homeschooling. In that time I noticed her withdrawing into herself, smiling less and interacting less with others. Her teacher noticed she would play by herself, and this contrasted sharply with her active, social behaviour at preschool. Since beginning homeschooled for one term, this behaviour has completely reversed. The reason for this may be related to her learning style. I notice when teaching her, that she often interjects with comments or ideas; once, when we came across ferns in our study, she insisted on running outside to pick a fern she knew of to copy into her book. As a former classroom teacher, I understand that this behaviour cannot be accommodated into a classroom situation, but it is evidently important not only to her love of learning, but also her happiness in general.

I have found that because they are homeschooled, my children continue their learning informally. One example is when we read about vascular and non vascular plants, and learned that moss doesn't draw water from its roots. While we were out and about a few days later, an outing unrelated to school, my daughter, who is in year four, spied some moss on the ground, and picked some to study under the microscope. She also designed her own experiment to see if it really could survive without having its roots watered. This valuable enrichment occurred so seamlessly, that the only effort I exerted was to protect the unfortunate plant from almost being thrown out by a well meaning houseguest who was clearing the bench.

Another advantage of homeschooling is that as a parent, I can decipher what my children mean when they speak out of context. Often my children will ask questions about a lesson days or weeks later, and as they are young, these questions are not contextually placed. The conversation might be something like "Hmmm, porridge for breakfast please... Hey mum, why did Digory ring the bell?" –referring to a part of a book we had read weeks earlier. If I had not been the one to read that chapter, it would take some investigating to work out who is Digory, what is this bell, and why he rung it- an effort I may or may not exert depending on what else needs to be done that morning. If I am not present at the original learning experience, that kind of follow-up learning opportunity would often be lost.

Another reason we have chosen homeschooling over school is that we feel it provides better opportunity for preparing the whole person for life. My experience was of success in school. I was

always above average. But my experience in life is that interacting well with ideas is only a small part of life. Many parts require interacting with and managing people, or repeating mundane tasks, such as those involved in caring for small children. I realise that early schooling has moved away from passing or failing students, and that there is more emphasis on school work, but I think when it comes to learning about relationships, my children, while they are young, fare better if I am nearby to guide, advise and correct. This level of adult input is not possible in a school setting. On the flipside, they are around me more, and can see how I interact with others. In one example, we popped into a school, I was friendly to a member of staff. My eldest was surprised that I would talk to a stranger. I could then explain that it is unsafe for children by themselves to talk to strangers, but it is different as an adult, and it depends on the situation. It occurred to me then that when they are in school, I run errands without them, and they miss out on these informal learning opportunities, which are too banal and too numerous to formalise into a school curriculum.

#### (ii) financial costs

Homeschooling our children is costing our family financially, but it is a price we are willing to pay. Our commitment to our children's education extends to all aspects of their upbringing, and it speaks of our character and philosophy as parents. We strongly believe we are working for the good of society in homeschooling our children. Not only are we saving the government money by not having our children in public schools, but we are committed to every aspect of their wellbeing as parents, raising honest, happy, healthy, productive resourceful, self starting individuals will continue to benefit society in the future.

I am home fulltime with the children, and thus we are forgoing a second income.

Our family loves reading, and we use stories to support learning in most KLAs. We love using the library, but there are many books that are not available in the library, both textbooks and fictions. We buy from the excellent booklists found at [www.Sonlight.com](http://www.Sonlight.com), and also booklists from eg: *Honey for a child's Heart* by Gladys Hunt. It would be helpful and keep costs down if these books were available at the local library.

We spend money on online learning such as Reading Eggs and Mathletics. We also buy equipment such as a microscope, craft supplies, beakers and test tubes, music instruments etc. We have done some basic woodworking, though if their interest in this area increases, it would be helpful to have access to more specialised machinery such as most high schools have. We also spend money on sport classes, as these are best played in groups. It would be helpful if we could join in school sport programs.

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

The decision to homeschool our children, was a gradual one for us. My husband has a Bachelor degrees in Science, Engineering and Theology (husband) and I have a bachelor of science and a

graduate diploma of Education. I have always loved learning, my dad would tell me about what he'd been reading in literature, history or philosophy from a very young age. As I was studying for my Grad DipEd, I came across alternative methods of teaching, and especially interest based learning. This intrigued me. I had achieved quite well at school, but I had never pursued my interests. I was determined to provide opportunities for my students to pursue their interests. While studying, I took a temporary position teaching at an independent High School. Here, I was able to provide flexibility in learning styles for my class, one group created a fantastic video as their learning method, and achieved better than they had in other topic tests. I did find the curriculum restrictive though, and there was very little time to pursue any personal interests the students might have.

We began having children. Still being interested in teaching, I brought the family to an education expo, and it was here that we first came across homeschooling. I spoke to people there, and our curiosity was piqued. Over the next few years, we covertly scrutinised any homeschoolers we came across. We found universally that the children seemed more mature, more confident, and less susceptible to peer pressure. We decided this was something we wanted for our children, and I love teaching, it made sense to me to teach my own children. Six hours per day is a lot for us to be away from our children in their formative years.

Since I had health issues, and being busy with four children under five, we decided to put our children into school until things settled down.

Last year, we felt capable of beginning to homeschool, and our lovely authorised person from the BOS put us in touch with other homeschool groups in the area. It was eye opening for me to see what can be achieved in a homeschool setting. I was sceptical when informed that schoolwork in the younger primary years only takes one or two hours per day (excluding read alouds, music and sport), so we worked five hours per day for the first term. I was shocked at the amount we achieved! My daughter in year three had completed around half a year in two maths curriculums, an entire year for science, completed a course on note taking and stylistic writing, learned the nine parts of speech, memorised twenty poems, advanced considerably in her piano lessons, read *My Sunburnt Country* cover to cover- a detailed history of early Australia, read a historical fiction on the British colonisation of Australia, and read over thirty junior novels for fun. This was achieved effortlessly still having time to pursue interests in sewing and knitting, playing daily with her siblings for at least a couple of hours, and attending each of the following weekly, where she interacted with other children for a couple of hours each: basketball lessons, homeschool picnics, afternoon girls club and church. I then understood the advice I had been getting. We still do more than two hours per day, but we are confident that we are achieving more than can be imagined in a school setting.

Being convinced that homeschooling works, both through what I saw in other homeschooling families, and what we were experiencing, we made plans to homeschool our middle two daughters who had been attending school. Our reasoning was that if we could achieve in one hour at home what is done in a school day, and it was taking me an hour per day door to door to drop them off and pick them up, it made more sense to homeschool.

Now our eldest three have been homeschooled for one term, and our youngest is at preschool two days per week. On our typical week, we aim to do much of our bookwork and computer work on Monday and Tuesday, when our youngest is at preschool. The children work on maths both on the computer, using worksheets, and drilling their maths facts. They all work on handwriting, the

younger two do phonics on the computer and in workbooks, our eldest works on vocabulary, thinking skills and spelling. They all work on these at their own pace, and I am available to assist if necessary. We then do some writing compositions together. We read a short passage, take notes, keeping to a maximum of three words per sentence, then the children use the notes to compose their own paragraph, incorporating a stylistic technique such as a who/which clause, adverbs, or strong verbs. The older the child, the more techniques required. They take turns saying their compositions, and I scribe for the younger children.

At this point, we are ready for lunch, after which the children play educational games such as Rummy Roots which teaches Greek and Latin root words, Scrabble card game for word building, Spot It for visual acuity, Hare and Tortoise or Monopoly for maths, Brain Quest for general knowledge, or even Addition/Subtraction Bingo. Our youngest then returns from school, and the children may or may not help get dinner ready. The children play, we have dinner, then we read stories for 45 minutes-two hours per night, this is a practice we have had since their birth. We choose entertaining stories that also teach History (Imagination Station), Science (Third Grade Detectives or Greg's Microscope), Maths (Life of Fred) or Creative Writing (Gooney Bird Green), or just books we enjoy (Boxcar Children, Winnie the Pooh, Narnia, Alice Miranda). Throughout storytelling, the active children are engaged with construction toys or puzzles, the quiet ones enjoy a cuddles, and all interject with questions or comments frequently, and all beg for another chapter. Before picking up where we left off, I might ask them what happened previously, or I might pause before a character makes a decision, and ask the children what they would do, or other informal questions of the sort.

On Wednesday and Thursday, when our youngest is home, we work through science and history together, and the children practice their instruments. I read a short segment from our science text book, and the children draw pictures and use coloured paper to make creative displays for information. I'll write a summary on the whiteboard. Our youngest might write the heading only, or the first letter of each word, middle two write increasingly more, and the eldest writing most complicated paragraphs. Our history lessons consist of listening to a textbook on audiobook while playing with play dough or kinetic sand, and we then work through the questions and craft (we're making a timeline) in the book as a group. We are also doing an online drawing in 3D course together. We have lunch, and the children play games or free play in the afternoon, then attend girls club, and dinner and stories is the same as outlined above. On Friday, we do music practice, tidy up and go to basketball lessons. We then have a picnic lunch with other homeschoolers, and all the children play all afternoon. Our weekends haven't changed since school days, we may catch up with friends, or just have a quiet one at home, and we go to church on Sunday.

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

Our children fall into the normal range at school in terms of educational needs. They don't have developmental, mental or behavioural problems and they achieve educational outcomes. We have never had any serious concerns in this area. However, since starting homeschooling, we have seen how our children are flourishing more socially, they are more confident speaking to adults, they are happier in general, and less tired and grouchy after school. As outlined in other questions, the children are freer now to pursue educational interests and enrichment projects, and they are achieving three or four times as much academically as they did when they were at school.

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

Our entire family has experienced school as students, I completed my Grad DipEd by distance education, and I have taught at High School. In my opinion, homeschooling allows for the best education for children in families.

I have outlined in detailed in my answer to previous questions how we homeschool, and I have related anecdotes of how informal learning occurs naturally outside set 'school times' when the teacher is a primary caregiver. I'm not sure if this will be read sequentially or in parts, so I'll cut and paste the relevant sections and indent them to make it easier to find or skip over as necessary.

My observations of my eldest socially were that she was shy, and rarely answered when an adult spoke to her. After homeschooling her for six months, I observed that she would respond fifty percent of the time without being prompted by me, and this figure has continued to increase. My third child is happy and active. She was at school for a year and one term before we began homeschooling. In that time I noticed her withdrawing into herself, smiling less and interacting less with others. Her teacher noticed she would play by herself, and this contrasted sharply with her active, social behaviour at preschool. Since beginning homeschooled for one term, this behaviour has completely reversed. The reason for this may be related to her learning style. I notice when teaching her, that she often interjects with comments or ideas; once, when we came across ferns in our study, she insisted on running outside to pick a fern she knew of to copy into her book. As a former classroom teacher, I understand that this behaviour cannot be accommodated into a classroom situation, but it is evidently important not only to her love of learning, but also her happiness in general.

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We are enjoying the learning we do individually and together as a family, and we enjoy the opportunities to talk about what we are learning outside 'school'. We could not do that if they were all learning different things, and while their communication skills are still developing, it would not be possible for me to always know what the children are talking about if I am not present, even when schools communicate what content they will be covering. If we wait until children can communicate with appropriate contextual frameworks before we can easily talk to a child about what they are learning, I'm guessing the habit of talking about their learning will be lost.

Good communication between student and teacher is also important. Some of my children are too shy to talk to the teacher if they don't understand. On more than one occasion, one of my children has sat quietly in the classroom and not done anything for ten minutes rather than put up her hand. This simply doesn't occur in our homeschool because the children all can talk to me, and the smaller class means I can be more aware of these problems.



Spending large quantities of time away from home has its disadvantages. Children can become naive about how a household is managed and how adults interact. When my children spend large quantities of time with children their own age without a familiar adult available nearby, opportunities to develop their social and relational skills are missed. My children have been too shy to approach adults they don't know, including playground teachers. When I am nearby when my children are playing with other children, I have experienced many opportunities to help them through small relational quips. I shouldn't think a playground teacher should be expected to provide this level of training, and children do manage to work things out. However, just as I would expect that my children would learn more about Botany by learning from those who have gone before than by only finding out for themselves in the backyard, I expect they can learn more about relationships if they are able to discuss it with an adult. For my children, the adult needs to be familiar, and immediately available, or these conversations will rarely if ever happen spontaneously, and to create formal lessons would be unnecessarily onerous. For academic as well as social reasons, I consider homeschooling to be a superior institution for education than school or distance education.

An important factor of the success of homeschooling over schooling or distance education is that the weight of responsibility for educating my children is on me. This may not be the case for everyone. When an institution is responsible or partly responsible for my children's education, I am not always acting to further my children's education. I am sorry to say that with sometimes with homework, or even following a set syllabus my motivation is ticking boxes. Let me be clear that I value my training as a classroom teacher, and I value the lessons and experience of other teachers, and I admit that there are many better than I; but I see great value in the hybrid mum/teacher. When I am my children's teacher I am aware of what they can do and what they should be doing. As a mum, I spend a lot of time with my children outside of school, and have opportunities to enrich their learning. Now, I have always been interested in my children's education, and the school my children attended was good at communicating with parents the outcomes children were working towards at school, and even giving advice on how we can supplement this at home. However it didn't work as well for us then as it does now; perhaps it is because I can witness their progress in the lesson, and that encourages me to do more; perhaps it is because the children have adequate play time, and I don't mind doing more school work with them, (while they were often tired and grouchy coming home from school). Whatever the reason, my hybrid role as teacher/mum seems to be working synergistically to produce more than the two separate roles could.

I have been indebted to other homeschooling mums who have mentored me this past year, and to the homeschooling books I have read which outline educational studies that have been conducted as well as practices in some families. In the self paced parts of our homeschooling, I value the time management and self motivation skills my children are developing, as well as the academic outcomes of the subjects. Facilitating my children to become lifelong learners, beginning now to confidently seek out their own learning experiences is of great value. I love teaching, but facilitating my children to become resourceful independent learners is more important to me than teaching specific outcomes, for the same reasons one would proverbially teach a man to fish instead of merely giving him a fish.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

I highly value abiding by the law, and as such it would take a lot for me to become an unregistered home schooler. However, there is no advantage in registering other than those of conscience. I keenly feel the threat of having someone declare my program unfit because it doesn't meet overly specific criteria, and contrary to research or even to evidence of my children's progress. Perhaps some incentive through support or finance would reduce the number of unregistered home schoolers.

(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons

I have been fortunate in having an excellent experienced with my authorised person. I feel that an AP should be supportive of Home education, aware of the different styles of homeschooling, and have some experience of what works- either through personal experience or through having observed a variety of families over time.

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

While the NSW syllabus appears to be the best in Australia, it would be hard to show that it is the only quality syllabus, or the best possible syllabus, especially given that Australian educational standards are not even the best in the world.

Education is more than filling a blank slate with facts, it is a teaching of processes and a developing of abilities and outcomes. It is clear from the NSW syllabus that the BOSTES agrees with this, so it is difficult to see why homeschoolers would be restricted to teach to a particular syllabus.

It appears that they aim to promote fluidity between all systems of education in Australia, but at a great cost to homeschoolers. If home educators can and do achieve far greater than what is possible at school, it is going against the aims of the BOSTES to limit them. Adherence to stage specific syllabuses limits the scope and quality of education in a homeschool setting as described in answers to other questions.

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

As described in answers to previous questions, we had no concerns with regards to the children's wellbeing while they were at school. However, since bringing them home, we have noticed

improvements to their wellbeing. Our eldest daughter who is shy is becoming more confident with talking to adults. She is also making great improving her oral communication (which was fragmented, and which she was more able to actively avoid in classroom discussions in spite of encouragement from myself and her teacher). Our second didn't like reading, and would complain while reading her home readers. We have been able to choose easy readers that she enjoys, and she now reads them voluntarily. She would also be anxious about having her homework done properly or handing in notes. Now she doesn't get anxious doing her work. Our third is very much a kinaesthetic learner, and she loves to interject with comments as part of her learning. When this was restricted (which is very understandable) in a classroom setting, she became withdrawn. She has completely reverted to her happy self since being homeschooled for one term.

So while I wouldn't have said at the time that school was detrimental to my children's development or wellbeing, I can definitely see improvements in these areas since they started homeschooling.

(vi) appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved

As a former classroom teacher, I welcomed the opportunity to have an authorised person look over my planned program for the year. Being new to Homeschooling, I was grateful for any advice or help. Having had a taste of homeschooling myself, having observed other homeschooling families, and having read many books and websites on homeschooling practices since I first began, and still having the initial registration process fresh in my mind, I would like to make some recommendations.

I read everything on the BOSTES website pertaining to homeschooling. I found the information pack helpful, especially the examples of work samples. It might be useful to explicitly point people to the support documents that have examples of typical work for each stage. I was greatly helped by the link in the information pack to the Homeschooling Down Under blog. Michelle gave a very detailed description of how homeschooling multiple children works in her family. I would have found it useful to have links to other Australian blogs, networks, books or Facebook groups to broaden my outlook.

It was just after my eldest daughter was registered that the 2013 information pack came out. I was quite distressed about the changes. The focus had changed from meeting outcomes to teaching content. In a family like ours with four children, that would mean I would be teaching from three or four separate syllabi each year. The programming became onerous, and our ability to learn together as a family was greatly reduced. It also works against one of our reasons for choosing to homeschool, that is, greater flexibility in pursuing interest based learning. I would like to continue homeschooling, but teaching three or four different syllabi will result in reduced quality of teaching and less time spent learning together and discussing what we have learned- and I value discussion for learning as well as for relationships. It also reduces some of our learning time to ticking content

boxes. It is not conducive to fostering a love of learning if the only reason we study a particular topic is because we have to.

I am grateful for all the work that the BOSTES has put into creating Stage statements and I value having outcomes to work towards, but I find prescribed content for each stage limits our scope and enjoyment of education, simply because we cannot do it together. We prefer to study the same topic, hearing the same book being read and discussing it together, then the children can work on graded activities as they construct meaningful neural pathways.

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

I would find it valuable to have access to lesson plans on Scootle. While I can currently use the program builder (which is a great resource- thank you), there is a wealth of valuable information on Scootle that is closed to home educators.

I think it would also be good for there to be information about HEA and all the benefits they offer, in the Homeschool Information Pack, and links to networks such as SHEN, or facebook groups like Homeschool Australia. These are invaluable in supporting new homeschoolers.

(e) representation of home schoolers within Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational

I believe homeschooling is a valuable option for educating children. It would be useful for there to be a representative in the BOSTES who is supportive of homeschooling so that the concerns of homeschoolers can be fairly represented.

(f) any other related matter.

I have noticed a distinction in my friends between the attitudes of homeschooling parents and those who have children at school. Both groups love their children and are committed to providing what is best for them, but when they run into frustrations, the homeschooling group feels the burden of responsibility to work towards a solution. In this group, we don't complain about our children, but talk constructively through difficulties. I was particularly pleased with this, as I had previously been frustrated in not being able to find young mums who didn't seem to be always complaining about their children.

Since beginning homeschooling, many of my friends with children in school have been relating anecdotes of troubles their children are having at school. These express frustrations and helplessness with situations arising at school such as bullying or difficulty making friends, or academic struggles- sometimes even while acknowledging that the school is doing all they can. In my observation, the helplessness seems to permeate into other areas of the parenting of these parents such as the childrens' behaviour and attitude while in the parents' care.

Perhaps an area for further study could be the long term effects of delegating educational responsibilities to a school, and the impact on parents' ability to fulfil other parental responsibilities.