

Submission
No 246

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

NSW LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

Personal Information

My name is _____, I am a married homemaker with two teenage children, living in semi-rural NSW. My husband is in full time employment, my 19 year old daughter is in her second year studying for a degree at Wollongong University and my 16 year old son is Homeschooled. For the past three years, I have been a moderator for _____, which is a large online support forum for Homeschooling parents.

My daughter, who is currently studying at Wollongong University, was schooled at our local NSW public primary and high schools from Kindergarten to year 12. My son, _____ has been Homeschooled since 2006.

_____ struggled at school, he couldn't settle and sensory issues made classroom life a constant source of stress. After paediatric assessment, we were informed he is on the borderline of the High Functioning Autism/Asperger's Syndrome end of the Autism Spectrum.

Having a child who is borderline for a special needs diagnosis is not easy. It means the child has many of the same issues, but does not qualify for extra support or funding. He did receive some Occupational Therapy, but as far as schooling was concerned there was no provision for a teacher's aide or other help.

_____ rapidly fell behind academically and his lack of social skills meant he became a victim of bullying. He was often too ill (probably stress related) to go to school because of bouts of stomach pain, vomiting and diarrhoea and when he did attend I was often called to collect him at recess because the same thing had occurred. Further paediatric investigation found no physical cause for this illness. During this period, I met a Homeschooling family and realised this might be a good option for _____.

We had to go right back to the beginning in literacy and numeracy, but with the one to one attention and less stressful environment at home he soon caught up. We found the smaller group 'get togethers' in our local Home schooling community less threatening and he began to thrive academically and emotionally. I used a Unit Studies/Eclectic based approach. At this stage he is studying the ACE (Accelerated Christian Education) year 11 and 12 course and is working part time 3 afternoons a week at our local supermarket. As we are reaching the end of his schooling years, I have noticed he is becoming more confident and I have no doubt he will be able to go on to tertiary education and be able to function as a mature and responsible member of society.

Reasons and Philosophies for Homeschooling

There are many Homeschooling families and the number is increasing dramatically. There are many reasons for Homeschooling as every family is different. Some, like me, have removed children from school due to bullying or special needs not being catered for, while others have philosophical and/or religious reasons for believing a child is best educated in the home. Some simply enjoy the freedom of being able to do things in their own time, not tied to the demands of the school day. Many people who start Homeschooling after their children have been in school, realise just how little time we spend with them during the week when they are at their best. We are either rushing them out the door in the morning or hurrying to get afternoon activities and homework done, while trying to cook dinner and prepare for the next day. Being able to have this valuable time as a family, can seem like a rare luxury these days when mums are encouraged to put their children into day care and get back to work as soon as possible.

After speaking to many mothers, I believe one of the reasons for the increase in Homeschooling is in reaction to concerns about the anti-family demands of our increasingly “Brave New World.”

Whatever the reason people begin to Homeschool, it soon becomes clear it is more than a way of schooling, it is a lifestyle.

My personal philosophy is very simple, I believe parents have the right and responsibility to choose the method of education they believe is best for their family or individual children whether this takes place at a public or private school or at home, as outlined in section 22 of the NSW Education Act 1990.

http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/ea1990104/s22.html#compulsory_schooling

I also strongly believe that the right to an education is a very important one. Article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

- *“(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.*
- *(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.*
- *(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.”*

<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

I cannot see how any other range of options would be possible in a democratic nation which values the role and rights of the family.

I believe that Homeschoolers should have flexibility to meet the basic outcomes required by the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES) by the age of 17, but in their own way and time, so long as education is progressing and special needs and/or learning difficulties are properly taken into account. In fact the same flexibility that schools which follow the International Baccalaureate, Montessori, Steiner systems have been given. As outlined by ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority).

http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/alternative_curriculum_recognition/recognition_register.html

NSW Syllabus and Homeschooling

One of the biggest causes of concern for Homeschooler in NSW is the increased insistence on adherence to the NSW syllabus. To have an across the board syllabus in our schools is very sensible and I believe an Australian National Curriculum is long overdue. However, the difficulty for Homeschoolers is that Homeschooling is not school and parents have chosen that path because they want something different for their children to what school offers. On top of this, the requirements are just about impossible to meet for families who have children in more than one stage and/or special needs children.

There are many different educational methods and a large benefit of Homeschooling is to be able to pick a method or combination of methods which suits your family. The concept of an education where “one size fits all” is the antithesis of the whole raison d’etre of Homeschooling.

There are those who teach “school at home”, Classical educators, Unschoolers, Natural Learners, Steiner and Montessori style, Unit Studies, Literature based, eclectic, the list goes on and on.

Families with children of various ages, tend to teach the same topic, but make sure the children are working at their own stages. This is a tried and tested system which works well. It is very difficult to teach different topics to children of different stages at the same time as the syllabus demands without detrimentally affecting the equality of the child’s education.

A child who is ahead in one subject area can forge ahead, not having to wait till everyone else catches up and a child who is struggling can go at a slower pace to ensure they have mastered a topic before they move on.

This flexibility is of particular benefit to large families, gifted children and those with special needs.

Registration of Home Schooling

Compulsory homeschool registration is disliked by some homeschooling parents who regard it as an invasion of their parental rights and privacy. The majority however, have no problem with registering and wish to comply with the law, but are worried that it has become too difficult. I believe appropriate registration, can actually have a positive role to play, when the passion and motivation behind the Homeschooling lifestyle is understood. It can be of great support to the majority of parents who work very hard to ensure their children have a good education and can, in the rare cases where a parent may not be educating a child, make sure this is taken as seriously as any other form of abuse or neglect.

I have always had very positive experiences with the Authorised Person's home visit and the registration process. My concerns, and those of many other parents, are that the new regulations do not take into account the differences between homeschooling and school and the different methods of homeschooling. This is causing many families to simply not register in the first place or to "go underground." We have no way of knowing exactly how many unregistered homeschoolers there are in Australia, but a registration policy which makes it easier to legally homeschool, would help improve registration numbers.

Homeschooling while Travelling

Some Homeschoolers choose to spend time travelling around Australia, believing the experience will be of great value for their children. In NSW, registered Homeschoolers, who wish to travel interstate, are required to enroll in Distance Education. This causes conflict with existing curriculum and educational methods the family are using and causes untold frustration. Surely in these days of instant communication a more effective method of keeping track of these families, while allowing them to continue educating their children without disruption could be implemented.

Representation of Homeschooling in the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES),

Homeschooling is growing at an ever increasing rate and this looks set to continue for the foreseeable future. As BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of Homeschooling in NSW, it would seem reasonable if a member of the Homeschooling community, Maybe a representative from the HEA (Home Education Association) <http://www.hea.edu.au/> was included on this board. This, I believe would help bring the needs and motivations of Homeschoolers to the attention of BoSTES and, I hope would lessen the misunderstandings that often arise between formal educators and homeschoolers.

Socialisation

Homeschooling is often viewed as an anti-social activity, people hiding their children away from the so called evil influences of society. On the contrary, homeschoolers often form close knit groups and are often very involved with many different community activities and sports. My son has been involved with our local homeschool group, which meets weekly, tennis, scouts, church activities and drama classes to name a few. He is currently a member of Venturers and Army Cadets, is involved with church activities and has a part time job in our local supermarket, which has helped greatly with his social skills.

He has had various opportunities to develop social and leadership skills. He earned the Grey Wolf badge, the highest award available in Cubs and in his final year was a Sixer (leader). He became a Patrol Leader in Scouts and his employers at the local supermarket have reported back to me that they are impressed with his work ethic and attitude.

Homeschooled children have the opportunity to meet all sorts of people, of all ages and see them as they go about their daily lives. Many larger Homeschool families have found their children become each other's best friends, which brings peace and harmony to the home.

Over the years, I have met quite a few young adults who were Homeschooled and have found the majority to be socially and emotionally mature, to have no problems relating to other people or making friends and are doing well in their chosen areas of study or employment. I have noticed that many of these young people have a high social conscience.

Financial Costs

Homeschoolers are usually, by their very nature, single income families, who meet the cost of educating their children themselves. In fact, they actually save the government quite a lot of money over the years. Homeschooling families can be found in all income brackets, not just the wealthy and there is some concern that some low income Homeschooling families have been denied Centrelink payments when their child turns 16. As a child is required to be in full time education till they are 17 years old, this is an issue which needs to be addressed.

VET Courses and Part Time School Attendance

Many Homeschooling parents would like their children to be able to participate in VET, U Turn the Wheel and other school based programmes. In Victoria and some other states, part time schooling where a child can be enrolled in one or more subject is available. I believe this should be considered as an option in NSW.

Safety, welfare and wellbeing of Homeschooled children

Abuse of children is a huge issue in our society in the present time. We cannot listen to the news without hearing of another case of alleged abuse by parents, respected church leaders, educators and horrific accounts of bullying of children by their peers. Sadly, it is believed this is the tip of the iceberg and that most abuse is never picked up and that the majority occurs within the home or by someone trusted by the child's family.

There have been concerns expressed that some people might Homeschool in order to hide abuse or that it might happen, but never be picked up as it sometimes is by a teacher at school. I am not going to suggest that abuse would never happen in a Homeschooling family. I think a cause for concern might be if a family was not involved in the community and the children were never "seen." Most Homeschooled children take part in activities such as sports, church youth groups, scouts, guides etc. and the leaders of these groups will have completed the compulsory Working with Children check and are mandatory reporters if they suspect abuse. The Authorised Person, who makes home visits, is also able to express any concerns they may have, as can the family doctor. I can only say that most Homeschooling parents have the best interests of their child at heart and many cases of abuse are missed by schools.

How safe are our children in school? My son was bullied to the point where he became physically ill and this bullying was not dealt with. Many children are bullied physically, sexually and emotionally in our schools in ways which would cause an adult to call the police and take out an AVO against the perpetrator. . My daughter, now 19 attended school and has told me many awful things happened without an adult ever becoming aware. Social media has opened up a whole new era in bullying, one that Home school parents need to be aware of as well.

I was a victim of bullying at school myself, not by another child, but by a teacher who shamed and ridiculed me in front of the whole class on a daily basis for two years. While I believe that the majority of teachers at our schools have the best interests of the children they teach at heart, sadly this does still happen.

One advantage of Homeschooling is that children tend to gather in smaller groups with all or most the parents supervising. While of course, this doesn't mean bullying never occurs, it is less likely to go unnoticed and can be dealt with instantly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe Homeschooling has a valuable place in a democratic nation which recognises the family as the basic unit of society and the parent as ultimately responsible for bringing up and educating their child, as stated by the United Nations declaration of Human Rights and recognised in Australian Law. Homeschooling, by its nature is different to school, it is a lifestyle and cannot be organised or controlled successfully by trying to make Homeschoolers conform to the same pattern. In my position as moderator to the Homeschooling forum "Aussiehomeschool" I speak to many parents, who want to do the right thing, want to abide by the law and Homeschool with proper registration, but are wondering what they will do if it becomes impossible to comply? Homeschooling is their life and their passion, they have seen it succeed and they are committed to it.

I believe it will ultimately lead to more families refusing to register and as Homeschooling is growing, a workable system of registration and accountability needs to be implemented.

I am very grateful Homeschooling parents have had the opportunity to make a submission to this inquiry as there is a lot of concern and uncertainty about changes to the current system, especially regarding changes brought about by the implementation of the Australian National Curriculum.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission