

**Submission
No 175**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

I make this submission to the inquiry as a mother of an only son. His home schooling journey began in late 2002 and ended at the end of 2013, an equivalent of Kindergarten to Year 10. Now he is studying at TAFE.

An inquiry such as this can only lead to more informed decision making with regard to home schooling, and I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to it.

My own background is that of having half my secondary education at a Catholic girls school in Western Sydney and the other half at a Government co-ed school in regional NSW, following that I went to Macquarie Uni and did a Bachelor of Economics majoring in Actuarial Studies.

I would like to comment on the following terms of reference:

(a) the background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand,

From the reading I have done NSW appears to be the state with the highest levels of home schooling regulation. A friend of mine who has been home schooling for more years than me, and who still has several children of school age, is actively considering emigrating to NZ. Of the reasons for this consideration the NZ home schooling arrangements which require far less paperwork, a wide range of free resources and financial support to home schooling families is in the top two reasons, the other being closer to the paternal side of the family.

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

(i) outcomes of home schooling including in relation to transition to further study and work,

My son has recently completed Certificate III Design Fundamentals and has commenced Certificate IV Graphic Design at TAFE. He was the youngest in his class, and yet he seemed to be the only one in his class to complete projects on time. About halfway through Cert III I was at TAFE to help him bring a bulky project home and met one of his teachers who thanked me for home schooling him because he had been so easy to work with. Later on when another teacher was absent for a few weeks, the classmates who were a few weeks behind in their projects looked to my son to show them what to do, and how to do it.

Because we were home schooling my son's imaginative and creative talents were able to grow naturally and not be distorted by negative peer pressure. Sporting achievements are held in far higher regard at boys' schools than cultural achievements, and those with the latter gifts tend to get labelled sissies or worse. Because we were home schooling we were able to visit local, regional and state art galleries without the noisy tomfoolery that often accompanies school visits. Because we were home schooling we were able to attend community college courses and TAFE Outreach courses that were beneficial to building a career with these talents. These, together with the adult art classes he took, and the benefits of opportunities provided by the local Art Society, meant that the transition to more formal learning was a gentle one.

By age 14 the average home schooled child has developed his or her interests to the point of wanting to specialize in an area of study. This is consistent with the medieval model of education, where most apprenticeships and tertiary learning began at this age. Prior to the extension of the school leaving age

from 15 to 17 this was not a problem, because that specialization took off after the last registration prior to turning 15. However the extension of school leaving age to 17 and the tightening of registration requirements is forcing home schoolers to do two further years of general education when they are hard wired to specialize and have minimal interest in subjects irrelevant to that specialization. In actual fact, because we had gone down the path of seeking these opportunities which made the transition to tertiary education easier we were told that those opportunities did not count at all towards reregistration. This made no sense at all.

The re-registration around the 16th birthday should be far more flexible with regard to being based on the BOS curriculum than any of the previous registrations.

(ii) financial costs,

In 2007 the annual government spending on government schools was \$US 6980 per student, and for non-government schools this was \$US 3616 per student.

<http://aphnew.aph.gov.au/binaries/library/pubs/bn/sp/schoolsfunding.pdf>

So at a rough estimate we have saved the government between \$38,500 and \$77,000 over an 11 year period, and more if you factor in the government cost of free student bus/train travel if our child had been at school, and were ineligible for even Family Tax Benefit A and its associated benefits (back to school bonuses, free annual dental visit etc) for the majority of those years. With this level of non-support we faced increasing levels of regulation and associated preparation of ever more detailed re-registration paperwork. At least teachers in schools get paid for the work they are expected to do towards school accreditation. To prepare for home school registration requires reading all the relevant curriculum documentation and then comparing each child's educational achievements with each curriculum outcomes and writing reports. For the last two registration visits in 2013 I would have spent 3 weeks full time work each in getting the paperwork ready, time that had to be taken away from learning activities.

There are several injustices which need to be rectified here. Home schooling families should get Family Tax Benefit A and all the ancillary benefits which are linked to it. The increasing amount of home schooling registration paperwork should be wound back. Some form of subsidy to help with the costs of internet access and computer hardware and software would be extremely helpful, eg access to the Q Stores at school rates..

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

We had several reasons for choosing to home school and continuing to home school.

The initial reasons were

- That we had seen several families home school and could see how beneficial it was to both students and families.
- We didn't know whether an embarrassing medical condition our son had would be cleared up by the time kindergarten started or not.
- The reputations of the schools in the local area were not good, and my experiences dropping my nephew off to the local Catholic primary school and picking him up were no better. At that time my nephew wasn't switched on about looking after items of clothing, and all I needed to do was to have a quick look around his desk before taking him home, but absolutely no adults whatsoever other than teaching staff were permitted in the school room. I definitely didn't want my son in an environment like that.
- Both my husband and I experienced various forms of bullying throughout out school days, and the chances were extremely high that our son would also go through them if we sent him to school. We desperately wanted to prevent that.
- We had seen efforts by families to pass on the Catholic faith undermined by conflicting messages from Catholic schools, and didn't want to see that happen either.

- Because of my unusual school background I had a grounding in just about all the high school subjects on offer.
- Because I don't like to settle for mediocrity the chances of my coming to loggerheads with principals and teachers was quite high, with home schooling I would have only myself to blame and a much less stressful life.
- I also wanted to make sure that our son was exposed to literary classics, Shakespeare etc, and knew that the likelihood for that in schools was low.

The continuing reasons were

- That we were enjoying learning together
- That we were able to start an exercise / project and finish it.
- That I had immediate feedback on how our son was going, and didn't have to wait for a report card or parent/teacher interview
- The joint activities put on by the local home schooling group were very good
- I had other home schooling mothers to talk to when any difficulties cropped up
- Our son was a delight to be around, and wasn't picking up the bad language and rebellious behaviours that his peers at school were
- The wonderful support of my husband
- The opportunity for his interests and talents to develop naturally, and to be catered for individually.
- Our son always did much better than average on the NAPLAN tests, so we knew he was keeping pace with his peers at school

(iv) extent of and reasons for unregistered home schoolers,

When I started out in 2003 the registration requirements were not unduly onerous, but with each legislative and BOS policy change they became more and more onerous. Today if someone starting home schooling asked me if they should register or not, I would advise against registration unless they wanted to their children to participate in the NAPLAN, ESSA and ICAS exams. Why? Because the current regulations and policies are removing the freedom of parents to respond to their children's educational needs and forcing them to do school almost exactly as the schools do it but at home. These days getting reregistered if you are following a classical curriculum, a Charlotte Mason inspired curriculum, an unschooled approach or anything else that doesn't fit neatly into the BOS curriculum is very difficult. If you have taken your child out of mainstream education because it wasn't working for your child, why on earth would you try the same approach that didn't work at school in your own home? What you do is you experiment until you find an educational approach that does work with your child, and use that, and adjust it as you go along. Should the registration requirements return to less onerous ways, with a focus on whether the child is learning, growing and developing skills rather than whether they have done the equivalent of x hours of history and geography, then I would start recommending registration again.

In my local area I was aware that there were some unregistered home schooling families, but I never bothered to find out who they were.

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

Having been around the home schooling community for more than a decade I have yet to see any child not thrive and flourish educationally and personally when taken out of a mainstream school environment. This is particularly true for special needs children (autism, aspergers, dyslexia, etc), many of whom need environments where regular routine is the highest priority. Mainstream schools have too many variables on a daily basis for regular routine to be possible, and generally do not have fellow students mature enough to put the needs of these children before their own needs. These special needs students come in for extra helpings of bullying in school playgrounds.

A recent US study of graduates of the unschooling branch of home schooling <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn/201406/survey-grown-unschoolers-i-overview-findings> found that there was statistical significance in the number of graduates who were earning a living from creative talent and entrepreneurship. As I look at where many of our local homeschoolers have ended up, there is a similar amount of statistical significance with emerging artists, web designers, drama teachers, graphic designers, journalists, musicians and illustrators among them.

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

Distance education is probably half way between school education and home schooling in that you learn at your own pace, but on a preset curriculum and have significant delays in getting feedback on your work. School education suffers because so much time has to be devoted to class control before learning can begin. Home schooling becomes part of the family lifestyle where reading is encouraged, watching documentaries is encouraged, and visits to museums, plays, art galleries, special lectures etc all add to the book learning and hands on learning that is already happening. These things have set our son up for a lifetime of happy ongoing learning. So catching the train to TAFE with a copy of G. K. Chesterton's 'Selected Essays' to read, and finding the 'If Walls Could Talk' series with Dr Lucy Worsley on Foxtel for the family to watch are things our son is doing by his own choice. I very much doubt that would have been the outcome with distance education or school education.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

My major concern about the regulatory changes of the past decade is that they have occurred without input and consultation with home schoolers. A related concern is that every time something is legislated for schools and school age children that the implications for home schooling families have not been considered. So we have the case with the NAPLAN exams that some legislative person decreed that home schools are security risks for exam papers, so we get the exams a week later. The average home has far more security than a school where a hundred or more people are passing through the administration buildings and principal's office on a daily basis. I still shake my head over that one. Then there are the new rules about how the approved person must see / interview the home schooled child. OK for most, but not for special cases for which the legislation makes no allowances, such as a child being home schooled as a path towards healing after being the subject of custody battles and who gets renewed trauma each time someone official wants to see her because they could take her away. Yes, I know a family who had to go through that and who had tremendous trouble because the regulations didn't permit common sense discretion.

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

The registration process as it currently stands requires quite a lot of work and loss of curriculum freedom for very little reward (compared to not registering). It stands to reason that if the reporting workload were reduced, the curriculum freedom increased and the rewards for being registered increased, then there would be fewer unregistered home schoolers.

I am concerned that the registration process has become a 'if you don't tick all the boxes on my checklist' you're out exercise, which overlooks and diminishes the value of all the things the checklist doesn't cover. It has become about finding fault rather than what it used to be, which was a celebration of the achievements of our young people and gentle chats about plans of action for the weaker parts of their development.

Part of the problem seems to be the mismatch between the longevity of approved persons and BOS administrators and home schooling families. An AP or administrator averages about 5 years in the job, whereas home-schooling families average 20 years. This often involves having to educate fresh APs, administrators and politicians about home schooling on a regular basis, which is frustrating. Each new crop wants to make their mark and tinker with the system. Thus about every 5 years there is a regulatory change. Home schooling families need to know that the goal posts won't be changed that often anymore

and only ever after extensive consultation. It might be more than time to start sourcing APs from mothers who have finished home schooling their children than from retired school inspectors and school administrators. Just like it takes around 6 months for a child to de-school, it takes a good 12-18 months for an AP who has been in the school system to start to understand the very different method of educating that home schooling is.

Most of my registration experiences were positive, nerve wracking but positive. The negative registration experience was with an AP who had a very forceful personality and who seemed to have pre-judged us over the phone when teeing up the appointment and came in with all guns blazing to shoot us down. Said person was a legalist who could have been carrying a chip on the shoulder for not ever having been promoted above head of department. We were belittled, and my son and I were still shaking hours after this AP left. Such a personality type should never have been hired as an AP. Home schooling doesn't fit into the neat boxes this person wanted them to. I imagine very few people have the inner strength necessary to stand up to this person and express a contrary view point, even other APs with more experience.

(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorized persons,

Please refer back to comments made in (i)

There is now a growing pool of women in their late 40s, early 50s who have successfully home educated several children. They are ideal candidates for future APs, especially if they can prove that they had good relationships with other home schooling families who used different educational models to their own.

Any new AP who hasn't been part of a home schooling family needs an induction process that includes spending quality time (at least a week each) with at least six home schooling families who use different educational models / philosophies in their home schooling.

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

The NSW syllabus is a 'one size fits all' approach to education. Home schooling works best when it is tailor made to each individual child. The more the government insists upon adherence to the delivery of the NSW syllabuses the less room each home schooling mother has to deliver the best educational outcome for the unique needs of her child. Here is the fundamental disconnect between the two, and all mothers will fight (as in do all within their power) to obtain the best for their children.

At high school level it is possible to do six subjects really well, or more subjects at shallower depth. We were trying to do classical subjects which had stood the test of time (Latin, Greek, Logic) and wanted to spend more time on them, but could not because the greater regulatory emphasis on the NSW syllabus meant that we had to do more history and geography. I would have much preferred to use that time to begin looking at rhetoric. We were standing still / going backwards to satisfy the BOS regulations that were not contributing to the known vocational and educational needs of our son. The classical subjects were by and large treated as non-subjects by the BOS, the same subjects that produced Augustine, Aquinas, Newton and other exceptional thinkers. Shouldn't it be more important to develop the known gifts and talents of a child than to comply with a 'one size fits all' syllabus? – especially if the child is enthusiastic about developing those gifts and talents and uninterested in the mandatory BOS subjects.

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

Mary Pride in her book 'The Way Home' understood home schooling as a greenhouse for young plants. You put fragile plants (our children) in a safe, secure and loving environment of the home, so that when they are strong enough they can survive, thrive and flourish out in the big wide world. I have found this understanding to be true. There is certainly something very good to be said for letting a child learn and discover who they are without the warping and corrosive effect of peer pressure, competition and bullying.

Our son was far from invisible to the community while being home schooled. He came with me to visit the nursing home, to go to church, to run errands, on family and group excursions, and interacted with people

in all those places. To see how he interacts with a tiny woman at the nursing home, who has dementia and asks the same questions week by week, would bring tears to your eyes. She thinks he is the bee's knees and he treats her with great kindness and gentlemanly courtesy, giving her a cuddle and leading her to her seat and sitting with her.

Some years back, 2004, there was a talk at a local school by an educational expert, Dr Charles Burford, about the different learning styles of children (verbal, tactile, visual, aural, etc). During his talk he said that there was a very strong correlation between laughter and learning, and that if he walked into an educational environment and heard the sounds of merriment then he knew that the students would be learning and thriving. At home there is the freedom to make mistakes, express surprise and delight at new achievements and to laugh when something funny happens. At school that doesn't happen as often or as naturally. Homes are great environments to learn in, after all that's where we first learned to walk and talk and gain independence in toilet matters and no one would disagree how important that early learning is.

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

The trend in the regulatory regime over the past 13 years towards increased adherence to the NSW syllabus and only the NSW syllabus is forcing home schools to replicate what is done in schools in the home. If there is no point of real difference, why would a mother bother giving up all her leisure time and the opportunity to earn an income in order to home school her children? The joy comes in discovering new things together, mother and child, and pursuing those things that capture your child's interest, not in a rigid framework that won't accept that a child can be happily doing year 6 English, year 7 Science and year 4 Maths this year at home at an age where they would be in year 5 (instead of being at school and being bored by the first two subjects and struggling with the third).

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

I would like to see home schoolers eligible to participate in all of the sporting, educational and cultural competitions that are currently restricted only to those at mainstream schools. I would like to see a system whereby home schooled students can have the same medical, dental and special needs opportunities and support as other children. I would like to see the requirement of a year 10 certificate waived for home schooled students wanting to do online short courses through TAFE, OTEN and other educational opportunities.

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

On the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards there are 23 people representing a wide variety of educational stakeholders and yet there is no home schooling representative. This body makes policy decisions for home schooling families without anyone on the Board having first-hand knowledge of home schooling. Please, such an illogical situation has to stop. The principle of no legislation without representation has to be upheld. The 24th Board member needs to be a home schooling representative.

(f) any other related matter.

Many moons ago I caught up with my 4 unit Maths teacher after finishing school. I learnt to my surprise that he literally learned on the job, lesson by lesson, staying around one lesson in front of us. It worked really well. Then years later I discovered that the subjects I excelled in at school caused the most friction in home schooling because it came so easily to me I found it impossible to understand why it was so difficult for my son. Conversely with the subjects I had the least familiarity with we were the most successful because we were learning together at the same time, and helped each other.

What a revelation it was to learn (the hard way) that reading, writing and spelling are as different as German, calligraphy and archeology to each other. Being good at one has no impact at all on being good at the other two. Each of those skills uses completely different parts of the brain.

Conclusions

I count myself and my son fortunate to have been able to do most of our happy home schooling journey together before the registration regulations reached their current level of tightness. Through teaching him I have received a far better education than in all my years at school and university. Instead of a surly rebellious teenager I have a young man who is a delight to be around and who is a credit to himself and to the rest of us. The former is the normal product of mainstream school, the latter is the normal product of a home school.

I count myself fortunate to have witnessed the home schooling journeys of many other families and to have seen the wonderfully positive changes that home schooling has provided for a wide range of children.

It is my hope that this Legislative Inquiry will result in making it easier for families to home school their children, and not more difficult.

Yours faithfully

Catherine Cavanagh