

**Submission
No 157**

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Dr Andrew McGuinness

Date received: 7/08/2014

Submission to the NSW Legislative Select Committee on Home Schooling

Dr A McGuinness PhD, MPhil, GradDipEd(Tech), BA

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

The UK system does not require registration in order to home school (although children who have been registered at a school must be deregistered from the school). The Badman Report of 2009 made a number of recommendations towards strong regulation, but these were all rejected by the UK Parliament.

(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,

What research there is on the outcome of home schooling in Australia and internationally shows that home schooled children's academic achievement is generally better than average, and that home schooled children are well socialised with good self-esteem. Some research has shown that home schooled children on average learn to read at a later age than schooled children; but then go on to read more, and to read more for pleasure, than their schooled counterparts.

There are several studies that show that success at school is strongly related to the home environment and the engagement of the parents with the child's education. Since home schooling parents are likely to be strongly engaged with their children's education (since they have chosen to give up an income and personal time in order to educate their children), it should not be surprising to find home educated children achieving well academically.

Comparisons between home schooling and schooling naturally focus on what is measurable: academic success and various measures of social development, self-esteem, and happiness. Occasionally, there is an attempt to quantify life achievement and satisfaction of home schoolers grown to adulthood. Academic tests focus on specific subjects and particularly on literacy and

numeracy, however, there are other capacities which underpin those subjects and which are also necessary for success in employment and in life. These capacities may be better learned in a non-school context, where the child is engaged with what they are doing in a more autonomous way. These capacities include, for example, working memory; executive processing; conceiving, planning and executing projects; making decisions; balancing conflicting plans and desires; carrying through plans in the face of discouragement; undertaking tasks which are not pleasant in order to achieve a desired end. It is wrong to conceive of adults' processes of running their adult lives (including employment) as different in kind from children's processes of running their lives. In each case, autonomy forms the basis for effective decision-making and actions. Children who are free to follow their interests will learn the self-discipline required for a successful life, including the responsibility for subjugating some interests to others.

(ii) financial costs

Financial costs for home schooling are borne mainly by the parents concerned ('mainly' because there is some difference in Centrelink payments where a child is home schooled). Costs include books and materials, entry to museums, transport (without school concessions), sporting activities, and classes which are organised by home schoolers (such as drama). These are costs that schooling families would also incur, to a greater or lesser extent. However, loss of income by one parent is the main financial cost for home schooling families.

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

The motivations of home schooling parents vary, although they probably overlap to some extent. Our family has a number of motivations for home schooling:

- to develop autonomy in our child
- to allow a deeper engagement with academic subjects than a school will offer
- to allow topics to be pursued as interest arises, rather than in the sequence stipulated in the school curriculum
- to avoid the gender stereotyping found in schools
- to avoid undesirable aspects of socialisation, due to the many hours spent in school in

a large age-peer group

I believe that children will be better socialised if they have close contact with more adults and small groups of children, rather than spending most of their time in a large group of age peers being directed by a single adult whose first goal is to keep control of the group. In general, I expect that our child will learn more by being exposed to complex domains for advanced knowledge, without being required to achieve specific outcomes at any time, for example, being exposed to adult vocabulary and concepts.

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

-

(v) characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children

It is worth noting that many children today are having difficulty with school, with a great many being diagnosed as on the autism spectrum, or with ADHD, or some other learning difficulty. While our child is not in this category, it may be that changes to schools have made demands on children which they once would not have had to meet. It was once possible to leave school at 15 and make a viable career in some field - that is impossible now. In addition, there has been a world-wide tendency to ask for specific academic achievements (like reading) at a younger age. This may not be the best approach. Home schooling parents are consciously exploring different models of education, and as such should be viewed as a resource.

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

There are a number of different approaches to home schooling, some of them very different from each other. Something they all have in common, however, is that the child's education (whether it is formal teaching, or an unschooling approach) benefits from being in continuous contact with an adult or adults who know them well and can tailor experiences and information to their current level of understanding. Due to this, the home schooled child is likely to be more often than not in Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development'. Home schooling is more efficient, not just for this reason, but because activities for one or a few children can be more quickly planned and carried out than they can for a classroom of children. In addition, much learning takes place in a real world context.

Where children are unschooled, they will benefit by undertaken activities just when their interest in that activity is at a focus. Note that 'unschooling', although it is sometimes dismissed as tantamount to 'unparenting' in fact usually a matter of sustained active engagement between parent and child, and a constant seeking by the parent of activities and materials which will stimulate and further the child's interest. Unschooling parents read and research on an ongoing basis in order to find useful ideas.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

The registration process for home schooling in NSW is a distraction which provides little benefit. Parents who home school do so in the face of obstacles including finance, and family and community misunderstanding (and sometimes disapproval). Parents home school from a commitment to their children's education, but the NSW registration system treats parents as delinquents who need to be closely monitored and controlled in order to achieve appropriate outcomes for their children. The close alignment to the curriculum which is required is contrary to the reasons many parents choose to home school - which is to take a different approach from school. Parents and children may wish to take content in a different sequence, to be ahead of school age-peers in one area but behind in another, to investigate some topics in more depth than school can offer, but not pick up every detail of the curriculum. In the end, the range of outcomes from home schooling is probably no wider than the range of outcomes at school, where there are always some children who fail to meet the requirements of the curriculum, and some who are well beyond it. Why should home schooling parents be forced to meet detailed and precise requirements to a level of specificity which does not apply in schools?

(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons

Visits by 'Authorised Persons' are intrusive, even when the individuals themselves are respectful (and there are certainly reports of that not being the case). There are also reports of inconsistent assessing between different APs. It would be impossible to train APs to understand the full range of home education - it can't be properly understood without either undertaken it for an

extended period, or researching it in depth. It would be sensible to simply drop the requirement for a visit by an authorised person.

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

Child development and stages of learning are the subject of ongoing research, and are constantly being revised, with new models put forward. One point that can be made is that not all children will develop at the same rate and different children will develop some capacities in a different sequence. There is a continuing debate as to what works in education, and there is no final answer. The debate, however, most often assumes that 'education' means 'school education', which means that the assumptions which are inherent in most school education are not in question. On the other hand, some of the principles and practices of home schooling may prove valuable for the development of education generally. Regulating home schooling according to the principles being applied to schooling will only produce more of the same. In order for home schooling to be different, it needs not to be forced into conformity with schooling philosophies.

State-provided education should be regulated - if the state provides free education (which surely it should) then the state should be held accountable for the education which it offers. But it doesn't follow that the same kind of accountability should be applied to home schooling parents. School children and their parents are 'consumers' of state education and have a right to accountability. But the state isn't a consumer of home schooled children's education; the state's role is only to ensure that parents provide education for their children. The need for accountability in that case is of a different kind from the need for accountability in the provision of education by the state.

In insisting on a particular curriculum, the state is saying that it knows better than the parents what the goals of education should be, for the benefit of the child and for the benefit of others in society (presumably the interests of the child are the most important issue). The usual argument is that participation in employment and life in the modern technological world requires the kind of literacy, numeracy, and technical and scientific

knowledge which is given in the school curriculum. However, even if this is the case, experience has shown that there will be some who do not achieve the outcomes of the school curriculum. In fact, although there are certainly places in the modern society for people who are highly literate, conversant with advanced mathematics, and able to develop computer software, there are also places for people who are none of those things but instead are entrepreneurs (possibly on a small scale), who work well with people, who like to work outside, and so on. It is a mistake to demand that all children must fit one mold of education, or be labelled as failures. Participating in the political, economic and cultural life of the nation could be seen to be met by quite a diverse range of capabilities and experiences. It isn't even that we should try to specify a minimum requirement - conceivably, different people might participate in political, economic, and cultural life in such entirely different ways that no description covers them all. If that's the case, then a curriculum which tries to specify what people should learn is likely to be too specific.

Similarly, it's not clear that having a common vocabulary of ideas and values is all that desirable. I can imagine that, for instance, both individuals and society would benefit from people holding very diverse ideas and values, and working through them socially in various (non-prescribed!) ways.

Consider this quote:

'But better yet would be a system of multiple, competing curricula which schools and parents can choose from, according to their own values, tastes, preferences, and philosophies of education. This is not as far-fetched as it seems. Australian schools already offer the International Baccalaureate, Montessori, and Steiner curriculums.' 'The farce of an ideologically neutral curriculum' (Chris Berg 2014, in The Drum. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-14/berg-the-farce-of-an-ideologically-neutral-curriculum/5198884>)

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

Despite the fears and downright hostility of non-home schooling people to home schooling, there is no evidence that any harm has come from home schooling, particularly in Australia. In addition, if there is a risk to children's safety and well-being, it seems unlikely that regulation would prevent it. If there is abuse or neglect of children in a family, the parents might conceivably avoid all contact by their children with the public. If this were the case, however, registration of home schoolers would not prevent it. In fact, two tragic cases of abuse and neglect which have come to light in NSW in the recent past¹ have both involved children who were already known to be at risk for some years. While in the case of one of these, the parents indicated that they intended to home school the child (but did not register), that statement was made in response to questions regarding the welfare of the child. The registration process in force at the time (which included a visit by an authorised person) was never carried out and so could not save the child.

Without research evidence, policy will be made on the basis of prejudice, rumour and unexamined assumptions. Welfare issues should be separate from home school registration. The current system, where a visit from an authorised person seems to be considered as partly to do with education and partly to do with welfare, treats home schooling parents as potential criminals. If a child's welfare is already a matter of concern for reasons other than home schooling, then that should be followed up regardless. If not, then the assumption of innocence should apply, as it does with parents of schooled children. It would be an unusual event that a child is neglected or abused, and kept from any contact whatever with people outside the immediate family, but experience has shown that it can happen in families who participate in school.

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

There has been a concerted protest from home schooling families in NSW over the registration process which has been in part responsible for this inquiry. If home schooling families feel that registration is onerous, why is this the case? Our family, together with all the home schooling families I know, are deeply committed to their children's education and development. The registration

¹ The case of Ebony, in Newcastle, and the Colt family (see <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/secluded-hills-hid-a-familys-darkest-secret-20131206-2ywps.html>)

process in NSW seems to begin from a conception of home schooling parents as being likely to neglect their children's education and development. It takes the stance that home schooling is to be (at best) tolerated, and that home schooling parents, in order to be permitted to home school their children, should be willing to submit to individual inspection and detailed reporting not required in a school setting. If registration conferred some benefit (apart from simply making the practice of home schooling legal) then home schooling parents could be expected to be happier with the process. Indeed, if the registration process made good sense - for instance, if it served the minimal purpose of providing information on the number of children home schooled in NSW, their ages and locations - then it seems likely that many would be happier about complying. As it is, registration is coercive, with some parents registering unwillingly, either because they don't want to risk illegal status or because they are reliant on Centrelink payments. (I should mention that our child is registered for home schooling and that we were given the maximum two-year period.)

Together with the problems around registration, there are other factors which seem punitive towards home schoolers and lead to a polarisation between home schooling and schooling. Home schooled children cannot get an HSC in NSW; they can take some subjects as external students, but on the other hand there are some subjects which they are prevented from taking. Home schooled students cannot access any aspect of the school system, such as selective enrolment in subjects, facilities, or sports activities. There are some barriers to VET qualifications for home schoolers. For many, this is not a problem, but there are some who would like the opportunity to access some classes, activities or resources and a more inclusive approach (already available in some jurisdictions in Australia) could only reduce the perception of social isolation which is often assumed (wrongly) to be the part of the home schooled children.

On the other hand, the number of home schooling families is growing, in NSW, and world-wide. Since this is the case, rather than looking to stricter regulatory controls, it would make sense to undertake research into why parents are choosing the difficulty, costly and time-consuming path of home schooling. Perhaps the government school system could offer some alternatives to the traditional school, such as a less strict curriculum and different styles of education?

statutory declaration that the parent(s) will provide a suitable education for their children - possibly including a statement of education approach - and registration without the need for a visit by an authorised person.

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

-

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

If there was representation of home schoolers with BoSTES, it could too easily be taken as a mandate to change regulations regarding home schooling at will. No individual could represent the range of views and approaches of home schoolers. Any changes to home schooling regulations by BoSTES should be a matter for public consultation. Home schoolers are diverse, and cannot be represented by any individual, or by any one body (including the Home education Association).

(f) any other related matter.

-