

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

**Name:** Name suppressed

**Date received:** 16/07/2014

---

Partially Confidential

## **Inquiry into Home Schooling:**

### **Addressing the terms of reference**

#### **Summary**

Why did we withdraw our two children from primary school, when both were performing well academically, neither have special needs, and there were no significant social issues being experienced?

This submission answers that question. It represents my insights as a home schooling parent, addressing the terms of reference of this inquiry.

This submission includes a detailed summary of why we chose to withdraw our children from school at the end of 2013 and begin home schooling them in 2014. It also includes relevant information about each child, comparing their current situation as home schooled children with their experiences at school.

Furthermore, this submission outlines our perceptions of the registration process and role of the authorised person, based on our very recent experience.

I believe this information, while detailed, is extremely relevant to the inquiry and trust that it will be read and considered.

## **Contents**

Terms of reference:

Page:

a) the background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand	N/A
(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	N/A
(ii) financial costs	Page 4
(i) (iii) demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children	Pages 4 - 8
(v) characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children	Pages 8 - 10
(vi) comparison of home schooling to school education including distance education	Page 10
(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including: (i) current registration processes and ways of reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers	Page 11
(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons	Page 11
(iii) adherence to delivery of the New South Wales Syllabuses	Page 12
(iv) potential benefits or impediments to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing	Pages 12-14
(vi) appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved	Page 14
(d) support issues for home schooling families and barriers to accessing support	Page 15
(e) representation of home schoolers within Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES)	Page 15
(f) any other related matter	N/A

**(a) the background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other**

**jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand**

Not applicable.

**(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,**

Not applicable.

**(ii) financial costs**

There are significant financial costs with regard to homeschooling. Some of the costs we've noticed in the six months we've been homeschooling include:

- Loss of income: as I am effectively working full-time to school my children, I am unable to undertake paid work. As a university-qualified professional, this represents a significant loss.
- Increased electricity costs: computer use, internet, cooking, dishwasher, hot water, air conditioning associated with having children home most days rather than at school.
- Curriculum and stationery: as a guide, have I spent approx. \$650 on curriculum materials alone, not including stationery, books or other materials used such as flash cards, games, toys, supplemental teaching aids.

We are giving our children what we feel is the best education and preparation for adult life, and we also feel society will be better for it, therefore the costs aren't a bone of contention for us, although of course additional assistance would be invaluable.

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

**Demographics:** My husband and I live in regional NSW, and have three girls, aged 4, 7 and 9. We only began home schooling our oldest two girls this year – so we have only completed six months of home schooling to date. Prior to home schooling, our eldest daughter had completed year three, and our youngest had completed the kindergarten year of NSW schooling at a small private Christian school in 2013. I am degree-qualified with a background in corporate communications and copywriting, and my husband is an I.T. professional. We are Christians, but do not attend a specific church denomination. We are registered home schoolers, with registration provided for one year from when we applied in late 2013.

**Motivation to home school:** This wasn't a decision we took lightly, and was not related to any specific negative experience at the lovely school our children attended. These are the reasons we decided that home schooling was the best choice for our family:

1. CHILD-SPECIFIC/PERSONALISED LEARNING:

No child is the same. Home schooling represented for us, the opportunity for personalised learning, where we could tailor the learning to each child – reflecting their unique personalities. We didn't feel the school environment could adequately do this, simply due to numbers, the demands on teachers to meet the syllabus outcomes, and a teacher's limited capacity to really KNOW a child in the same way a parent can/does.

2. MOTIVATION BASED ON A DESIRE TO LEARN, NOT REWARDS

Home schooling our children allows us to work with their personalities, interests and unique gifts, in order to foster a learning environment that is engaging, and which motivates them to learn. We do not feel a rewards-based approach, or an approach based on testing and comparing academic results (which was our experience with the school system) represents the best environment for our children to grow into self-motivated learners. Indeed, by the time our eldest daughter was in year 2, school was already being viewed as a 'chore', her favourite subject was 'recess or lunch', and she already knew who the 'smart kids' were because of comparisons in class.

3. REAL-LIFE/HANDS-ON LEARNING:

We wanted to embrace learning by doing, not just by reading/hearing about something. Real-life experiences offer opportunities for children to learn in a way that can't be provided by books or classroom learning (schools take children on excursions for this reason). We felt that home schooling offered us an increased opportunity for this style of learning. We wanted our children to be learning by serving in the community, growing, exploring, visiting, getting their hands dirty, and interacting with a variety of people in our community who have a lot to offer educationally, through their skills and knowledge. This just simply isn't possible within the confines of school.

4. FOSTERING DIVERGENT THINKERS:

While our children were doing well academically, we wanted more for them than academic results. We wanted them to be constantly thinking outside the box, reflecting, challenging convention, risk-taking and expanding their knowledge and skills through their own exploration. We feel this is not just best for our children, but for the society we are raising them to participate in. We don't feel this can happen in an environment where every child is given

the exact same education. This short talk by Sir Ken Robinson illustrates how we feel with regard to this issue: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U>

5. RELIGIOUS BELIEFS/ BEING NON-MAINSTREAM:

As Christians, we want to instil into our children the idea of being IN the world but not OF the world. For us this means being an active part of society but not conforming to everything that society says is 'normal' or 'valuable' or 'important'. We hold to fairly high moral standards, and while we don't believe in sheltering our children from the world, we do believe that the school environment plays a significant role in fostering conformity and a desire to 'fit in'. We feel home schooling offers us the opportunity to raise independent children who can have positive relationships within society, while being certain of who they are as individuals.

6. HEALTHY, GUIDED SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS:

We felt that home schooling represented the best opportunity for our children to experience positive social relationships with both other children AND adults. At school, the child to teacher relationship is somewhat limited, given the ratio of children to teacher and the requirements and limitations on the teachers. We wanted our children to have access to closer adult relationships, with adult mentors who can bring their skills and experiences to the learning lives of our children. We also wanted our girls to have social relationships with other children which were not just based on what happens in the playground, but in which social interaction is a little more overseen (but not to a stifling level). Through home schooling, our children's social skills are developed and nurtured in a more controlled manner than in a school environment where social interaction takes place, largely unguided and in response to peers. Instead, our children's social skills develop in response to the family and home environment, and healthy, guided child/child and child/adult relationships. It doesn't mean bullying won't happen, but we are there alongside those relationships in a way we can't be at school (nor can a teacher).

7. LIMITED TECHNOLOGY:

The school our children were attending required all students to have personal iPads from year 5. We see this as an increasing trend in educational institutions. While technology has its (very important) place in society, we are not comfortable with the emphasis being placed on it, with regard to education. We feel there are physical and mental health impacts not being addressed, and the examples we saw of technology being used offered little in terms of creativity and divergent thinking. We believe technology is easily taught in smaller doses, and such a heavy reliance is not necessary. My husband works in I.T. and is confident that our children can make the most of what technology has to offer, and learn what they need to succeed in whichever

path they choose, without needing to use it as regularly as schools are increasingly doing.

**8. SELF-AWARENESS:**

We believe home schooling offers us opportunities to understand our children better and to help them be more aware of their gifts/talents and grow in their self-awareness – as opposed to them spending 6+ hours a day, five days a week, away from their family. Through home schooling, we aren't just educating them, we are helping them explore and understand who they are, and giving them opportunities to expand on their own identities through their learning, rather than simply following mainstream trends or trying to be who they think they 'should' be. Well-educated children who also have a clear sense of self, can make a positive impact on society, and we believe our children will best achieve that through home schooling.

**9. STRONGER FAMILY UNIT – WHICH BENEFITS SOCIETY:**

We felt a strong need to 'reclaim' family as the main influence on our children's life, rather than media, school, peers and teachers. We feel 'family' is not given the respect it deserves in society, and that parents are increasingly encouraged to be in the work force, away from children, and leave them in the care of others. While we don't believe in sheltering our children from the 'real world', we feel that home schooling strengthens our family unit, and brings family back as the centre of relationships, learning and identity for our children. We know that a strong, supportive, loving family unit represents the best environment for children to succeed and go on to be healthy, well-adjusted adults. While a secure, loving environment is not the unique domain of the home schooler, we feel our children benefit from that extended time with us that is not afforded families whose children are at school five days a week.

**10. LETTING CHILDREN BE CHILDREN FOR LONGER:**

We believe the current school environment and curriculum requires a lot of children, from a very young age. We don't feel children are disadvantaged by starting formal learning more slowly and at a slightly older age. Home schooling affords us the opportunity to move a little more slowly (if needed) with our children, and it also gives us the time to allow them more play. We believe this is incredibly important and, in the long-term, will contribute to them being better learners.

**11. A RIGHT TO CHOOSE:**

We appreciate that the education made available to our children by the government is an absolute privilege, and believe every child deserves access to an education. However, we also believe the ultimate choice in how a child is educated should lie with the child's parents. We feel we should have the choice to 'opt out' of formal schooling, for home education, should we,

as our children's parents, so desire.

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

We are registered homeschoolers. We chose to register for two reasons: 1 it's simply the right legal thing to do; and 2 we wanted to be sure we were covering off everything our children needed to learn and have that accountability. In saying that, we believe there is room for more flexibility in the system, and that those who have proven their home schooling commitment and capability should have some leniency around having to regularly report.

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

**Insights into our two home schooled children:**

**Miss 9 years old:**

**Before home schooling:** Our eldest child was achieving extremely well academically at school. Her 2013 NAPLAN results scored her at band 6 or above in every category, far above national average, and she received the award for academic excellence for her year level for every year she attended school (K to 3). She also had no major issues socially and plenty of friends. Despite this "success", we wanted a more rich and varied education experience for her.

Miss 9's motivation to learn was lacking, and there was nothing about her schooling experience which inspired her. There was little creativity required at school. We also found school was not building in her a resilience or acceptance that sometimes things will be difficult (and that's where learning begins!). The emphasis on rewards and testing meant that she was regularly praised, rewarded and given prizes – despite having to make very little effort and mostly achieving through natural ability alone. The motivation to achieve was tied in with recognition and reward, not a satisfaction with learning, and enjoyment of the content.

Socially, while there were no major issues, and she had some nice friendships, there was a nit-pickiness to her relationships, and a sense of drama and exaggeration (not uncommon among girls of this age) which often caused confusion and frustration for Miss 9. We also saw her as a follower, easily led by her peers.

**Since home schooling:** When we first began home schooling, any time our daughter was challenged by something difficult, she would become very upset. We are still working through this, and teaching her that we achieve most when we are faced with difficulty. I feel this resilience does not come through the style of education given at school – this motivation to try harder things and learn through making mistakes. The ultimate goal of her school learning appeared to be answering questions correctly, and completing tasks – and we wanted more than this.



In the six months we have been homeschooling Miss 9 is thriving. We are seeing her embark on creative endeavours she would never have had the opportunity to attempt at school, and allowing her fascination for nature and animals to grow and be explored. Socially, we are seeing Miss 9 enjoy play with other children that involves very little drama, and a lot of exploration, and just plain fun. She is loving having relationships with children of varying ages – both older children and much younger children. She is learning how to communicate with a large array of age groups, and connecting with children whom, at school, she'd have been unable to interact with due to them being a different age/year level. This includes helping her sisters with their learning, which we feel is extremely valuable for her own learning.

If our daughter had continued at school, she would probably have achieved great marks, and looked great 'on paper'. However, we believe our children's education isn't just about preparing them to achieve the highest marks possible or attain a particular job. It's a whole-of-life preparation. We want to raise them into adults who are socially responsible, have high moral standards, are risk takers, are hard workers, are creative thinkers, are inspired and motivated to continually learn, are equipped to live effectively in the world, and have the opportunity to achieve whatever it is they hope to achieve in both their careers, and their lives as a whole. That's why we choose to home school.

#### **Miss 7 years old:**

**Before home schooling:** While our second child does not have any specific special needs, she is quirky, creative, restless, sensitive to certain stimulation, and definitely not traditional in the way she learns. She came to her school experience from a preschool which promoted play and natural learning, in which she thrived and proved to be a creative and curious thinker. When we went to enroll her in the school she attended in 2013 the head of infants asked us if we had any concerns. I said that I was concerned her creativity and quirkiness might be squashed in a conformist school environment. The head of infants' response was "Yes we do find that by the time children finish primary school the focus is on academics, not creativity." This did not reassure us.

While Miss 7's experience at school was not especially negative, we felt that what made her unique was becoming 'lost in the system' and we very much wanted to see who she would evolve into, without being squished into the school 'box' that requires all children to be the same, and act the same.

**Since home schooling:** Since beginning home school we are learning so much more about her. For example, she struggles to write, but can tell the most fantastic stories, which are articulate and use sentences that show a level of understanding of language beyond her age. She is also reading like an

absolute trooper, now that we are giving her quality literature to read, rather than uninteresting home readers.

We are learning that Miss 7 needs a lot of movement and change – she can't sit behind a desk for long periods or concentrate on one task for too long without losing focus. A home school environment allows us to work with that, rather than a school environment in which she would have been forced to sit still, work at a desk, and focus for extended periods. We also see that she learns significantly through play and role play – something there was very little of at school. Miss 7 is also a wonderful nurturer and loves to lead younger children on wonderful play adventures, through storytelling and games. Within a school environment she was required to play with children her own age and year level, whereas we are seeing her thrive through her interaction with children of varying ages.

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

When we began our home schooling journey we investigated private distance education as an option, because the registration process for home schooling daunted us. We also liked the idea of curriculum material being provided for us, and everything planned and organised externally. However, the more we researched, the more we realised how little flexibility distance education offered. When we turned back to our reasons for home schooling, we realised the distance education model simply couldn't achieve many of our aims, due to the lack of flexibility. As a result, we discarded it as an option for us.

Our home school environment differs from that of a school environment in many ways, and distance education does not allow for this. Here are some of the ways our home schooling isn't just 'school at home' and doesn't fit with the distance education model:

- We meet together regularly with a large number of other homeschooling families for social interaction, and group learning. Some of the activities we have done this year include: army day/boot camp, gymnastics, cooking, tennis, dance, bush tucker, study of countries of the world, woodwork, outdoor games, cross country. These experiences are valuable and unable to be replicated using distance education.
- We collaborate on some subjects with another family. This allows our children to work in a group, to experience teamwork, group thinking and social interaction, and also to learn from adults other than myself. This is done in a very hands-on manner, incorporating creative arts and excursions, and meets the BOS requirements while allowing for fun, creative, in-depth learning. This could not be replicated via distance education.
- We have chosen to step away from testing for our children at the moment. Since we are closely involved in their education, we do not feel testing is required, as we are already aware of their progress and needs. We also feel that, while they are young, testing places unnecessary pressure

and can hinder their desire and consequently their ability to learn. With distance education, we would be required to undergo testing and regular reporting on our children.

- Distance education would require us to stick to a specific order/sequence. With our home schooling, we might choose to rearrange the sequence of learning for various reasons, such as wanting to do a more intense study on a topic, or to incorporate a holiday into a unit study. With distance education, we would be unable to do this.
- Our style of homeschooling regularly involves our two home schooled children learning together. While they learn at their appropriate level, the subjects/topics we look at are often combined. For example, both children might study insects for science, whereas a set curriculum might require one child to study the planets, while another does insects, due to their different year levels/stages. The advantage of schooling this way is that we can undertake in-depth, fun and creative activities as a family, and really ‘live’ the topic, in a way we can’t do with two children studying separate things. With distance education, this is simply not possible.

**(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:**

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

We have stated above our reasons for choosing to register. Our registration experience to date is quite limited and the AP who visited us was positive, complimentary, supportive and informative.

However, the government still appears to view home schooling as a desire to replicate schooling at home, requiring home schoolers to indicate how they will meet each syllabus outcome for the appropriate year/stage. While we want to meet the ‘official’ requirements, the whole point of home schooling for many who choose it, is the opportunity to do things quite differently when it comes to learning. While the desired (and very much planned for) end result is still a fully educated child, ready to enter university/workforce/TAFE and adulthood, the process might look quite different, and/or take place in an entirely different order than required by the BOS. We would welcome a more flexible approach, designed in consultation with home schooling parents, that recognises the fact that home schooling isn’t simply ‘school at home’. As the process currently stands, we can understand why many families choose to remain unregistered. There are many varied approaches to educating a child – but very few of these are recognised via the current registration process.

**(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons**

If the registration model is to continue as is (i.e. fairly strict), we believe the AP role should be one of support and advocacy, not simply regulation. An AP should have some experience with home schooling, or at the very least a respect and understanding of the benefits of home schooling. They should also be aware of the varying methods that can be adopted for home schooling – for example, understanding that a Charlotte Mason approach will look different to a Steiner approach or a

traditional approach, but that all will have a positive end result for the child.

The AP who visited us had home schooled her children and was openly supportive of home schooling as a positive choice for families who decide to undertake it, while at the same time having an understanding of the syllabuses and helpful suggestions with regard to our plan. We feel this balance is essential under the current registration model.

An AP should be able to recognise the sincerity with which home schooling parents approach their role, and their capacity to do what is required of them in order to educate their children appropriately. This recognition may not require viewing detailed plans and measurable outcomes, as is currently required. It may simply be through knowing the home school families they serve, coming alongside them to build trust, and being there if required for advice and consultation. At present, we can only communicate through BOS, not our AP directly.

We take our decision to home school very seriously and make the choice ONLY because we feel it is the best choice for our children. We would welcome an AP who can recognise that desire and drive in us, respect it, and come alongside us for support where needed, rather than simply measure our capacity to meet quite rigid requirements.

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

Our commitment is to provide the highest quality education for our children. We wouldn't have chosen home schooling otherwise. It certainly isn't the easiest option! Our experience with the syllabuses to date has been limited, since this is our first year of homeschooling, but we have some thoughts on adherence to the syllabuses.

We feel there needs to be some flexibility for home schooling families in determining how and when they implement the syllabus requirements, if at all. If a home schooling family wishes to step outside these requirements – either by adding or removing required outcomes – there should be scope for this. Unless there are serious concerns for a child's welfare, parents should have the freedom to make educational decisions about their child which may differ from those implemented by the government for children attending school, with appropriate justification.

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

Are our children missing out or being disadvantaged by not attending school? Is their general welfare at risk? We thought through the common arguments against home schooling that we were hearing, and we considered each issue in detail before making our decision to home school. A summary of the questions we considered, and our conclusions, follows:

**Q: Are we impeding our children's social development?**

A: Most people use school as a benchmark for how many hours a child needs to be among other children in order to be adequately 'socialised' – i.e. 6 hours a day, 5 days a week. The reality is a child doesn't need to be 'social' for that long in order to be able to function 'normally' in society. Our children socialise regularly (throughout the week) with other home schooled children, as well as with other kids through friendships, sport and other community activities.

**Q: Do our children miss out on teamwork and collaboration as part of their learning?**

A: No. We get together during the week with at least one other family for intentional, shared learning experiences – doing joint projects, and studying several units together. We also join our wider local home school community for regular learning and social experiences. Our children are part of sports teams and community groups as well.

**Q: What if we can't teach something they need to learn?**

A: Firstly, as someone who achieved at a high level academically, I believe I have the intellectual ability to meet most of my children's educational needs, from the perspective of understanding the content required. However, teaching is much more than intellectual knowledge and a great teacher isn't always the one who knows most. There are many options such as online learning, and very well explained curriculum material, which doesn't require expert knowledge from the parent. If a child shows a particular interest in a subject area we don't feel equipped to follow through with, we have several options: link up with someone who can help, use online or curriculum material, or enrol our child in a TAFE or equivalent course when they are at senior level.

**Q: Will our children be missing out on things by not attending school?**

A: Yes. Some (many!) of them negative, some of them positive. They won't experience many of the rites of passage we ourselves experienced in mainstream school. They won't know the sinking feeling of forgetting your homework or the buzz of winning an award at assembly. They won't have the hype of school camp or the fun of large group athletics or swimming carnivals.... But the flip side is that they will have many things regular kids at school won't have. Access to mentors and a much wider array of experiences. Less threat of bullying or peer group pressure. The ability to grow into who they are without adjusting in line with who their peers or media pressure them to be. Lots and lots of excursions and hands-on learning. A rich, diverse, learning environment. In addition, we can replicate many school-type experiences – we can set tasks with deadlines just like school does; we can send them to church camps or sleepovers; we can do competitive athletics or swimming on a weekend; and so on. Yes there are pros and cons – we've weighed them up and for now, we choose to home school.

**Q: At some point kids need to be able to survive in the big bad world – isn't homeschooling isolating them, and not teaching them to deal with difficult situations, or difficult relationships, or cope with peer group pressure?**

A: Firstly – the same question must be asked of school. Does school adequately prepare children for the 'big bad world'? At school they are taught that success is linked to how well they do in exams. They are taught that they must conform, not take risks or be different. They are taught that creativity is for the weekends, uniformity is for weekdays. They are taught that children who can't sit still and listen are 'naughty'. They are mostly taught by reading/looking/examining rather than DOING. They are isolated in an institution with very little exposure to the 'real world' in terms of getting out there and learning within it.

Granted, our children may not hear gossip about Justin Bieber in the playground or have to consider what to do when a friend offers them a cigarette. Then again, they may – they still have friends and operate in social circles, we still have the internet, social media, television, etc. We personally choose not to be out of touch with society and culture – social media and the internet makes this easier, as does our commitment to seeking and maintaining relationships outside of home school and Christian circles only.

It is our job as parents to equip our children to understand and cope in the real world, while being aware of who they are and where they fit. We feel through home schooling we can provide a strong and secure foundation from which they can grow into independent adults, and at the same time provide them with a culturally rich, diverse and challenging learning environment which will serve them well as they move into their post-schooling lives.

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

We welcome any appropriate regulation that respects the rights of parents to educate their children in a flexible manner. We understand there are concerns that the right to home school may be abused by some parents. We therefore support some sort of framework that assists in ensuring children aren't missing out on the privilege of being educated, and aren't being neglected by parents who simply aren't bothering to meet their needs.

However, in our experience as new home schoolers we have already met and communicated with a very large number of home schooling families. Including the online network, in the number of hundreds. On the whole, we have found them to be the most knowledgeable, well-researched, motivated and perceptive educators who are willing to work very hard to give their children the best education possible.

We, like every home school family we know, take our responsibility seriously. However, for us to do our job best, we need the flexibility and trust of the government, with regulations that consider the varied ways in which home schooling works.

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

At this stage we have no special needs which we feel aren't being supported due to our decision to home educate.

It would be wonderful if there was scope for home schooled children to interact with schools, whether through shared learning, skill-swapping, sports or socially. It would also be wonderful for home school families to have access to the same support networks and programs school children have access to.

It would also be fantastic for home schooling parents to have access to professional development opportunities in the same way teachers do.

We believe this will only happen when home schooling is understood as an alternative option that makes a valuable contribution to society, and respected as a positive alternative to school.

As already mentioned, we also feel the AP should have more of an advocacy and support role, rather than as an 'inspector' representing the 'other side'. The more support home schooling families have, the better, not just for the families themselves, but for all of those in society who will one day benefit from the fruits of the home school parents' labour.

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

**Educational Standards (BoSTES)**

We believe there should be a home schooling representative on the BoSTES. This representative would not just represent the increasing number of home schooling families, but make a fresh, diverse and enlightened contribution to this valuable group.

**(f) any other related matter**

N/A