

Submission
No 198

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the Home Schooling Inquiry. My partner and I have 3 children, 2 of whom are currently registered for home schooling (while the 3rd is pre-school age). My sister and I were home schooled at various stages throughout my childhood in New Zealand and found it to be a very positive experience.

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

(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,

While my children are all still at primary or pre-school level I have experience from my own childhood that relates to this. I was homeschooled in NZ at various stages throughout my childhood and grew up with several families who were homeschooling their children - I am estimating a group of about 15 children, who are now aged in their 30s and 40s, and that I still have knowledge of or contact with. The large majority of this group studied at a tertiary level with excellent results (2 of them hold PhD's: one in Marine Biology, who was also recently awarded the Unesco-L'Oreal International Fellowship for Young Women in the Life Sciences; and the other in Chinese Linguistics); all of them are high functioning adults, successful in their own right – and I rate all of them as among the most interesting, articulate and engaging adults I know. Personally, I transitioned easily from home schooling, to boarding school for my secondary years (at my own insistence, as the school offered a course I was interested in. My parents agreed to the idea, but were financially challenged so I applied for and won a scholarship which provided financial assistance for 5 years of boarding school). I hold a Masters degree (with distinction) and have successfully run (and later sold) my own business among a wide range of other employment pursuits.

In my experience, home schooling provides outstanding results in transitioning to further study and work, by allowing a child's natural inquisitiveness to flourish in the areas that interest him/her most, which leads to self motivation and independence when it comes to further study and/or employment.

(ii) financial costs,

The decision to homeschool our children comes at a large financial cost for our family as we choose to get by on one wage. This simple fact (i.e. my forgone income) makes homeschooling our children the most expensive education choice of all, even without including the money we spend on resources, extra curricular activities (many of which would be included/provided at school), and classes/excursions. We are in fact saving the government money by taking on the cost of educating our children ourselves, and yet there is very little financial support. The high cost of home educating mean that this is a decision we do not make lightly, and is a direct indication of the level of our commitment and investment in our children and their education. We would certainly appreciate any financial support the government can offer in terms of homeschooling our children.

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

Our family consists of my partner and I, and our three children (aged 9, 7 and 4). My partner and I have both completed postgraduate university study (we both hold Masters degrees). My partner currently works full time in self-employment and I am the main homeschooling parent. Our eldest daughter attended school for 2 years before we made the decision to commit to homeschooling. I had hesitated to jump into homeschooling immediately because my partner travels a lot for work and is often absent and I wasn't sure how I'd cope with 3 children on my own a lot of the time. However, his absences also ended up being a significant factor in our decision to homeschool. He was starting to feel like he was losing touch with our daughter, because the times that he was at home she was often at school and we felt they weren't able to spend enough time together.

Ultimately, our decision to home educate is largely based on my positive personal experience of homeschooling, and the fact that we believe that education should be about preparing the whole person for life. I am not convinced that the traditional school model caters very well to this. I feel there is a misplaced emphasis on testing, and teaching to tests that results in children losing their natural curiosity and love of learning. My experience is that if children are permitted to delve deeply into their passions and spend time doing things that are truly meaningful to them, then their learning happens joyfully, spontaneously and without limit.

Aside from my own experience, I have been inspired by the writings (and speeches) of education reformer Sir Ken Robinson (his "Schools Kill Creativity" clip is reportedly the most viewed TED talk of all time), who says that the world is changing at such a pace that it is impossible to know what we should be teaching our children (in terms of what will be relevant in years to come), and instead we should be encouraging creative thinking and building on personal passions to develop entrepreneurial skills. He is not the only one calling this tune, as this article quoting education expert Yong Zhao demonstrates:

<http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/education-expert-dr-yong-zhao-says-schools-stifle-creativity/story-fnihsrf2-1227009187085>

John Holt's writings also ring very true to me; see below a few of his quotes that support my reasons for homeschooling:

"By nature people are learning animals. Birds fly; fish swim; humans think and learn. Therefore, we do not need to motivate children into learning by wheedling, bribing, or bullying. We do not need to keep picking away at their minds to make sure they are learning. What we need to do – and all we need to do – is to give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for, listen respectfully when they feel like talking, and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest."

"The most important thing any teacher has to learn, not to be learned in any school of education I ever heard of, can be expressed in seven words: Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners."

"We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions -- if they have any -- and helping them explore the things they are most interested in."

This short video by an organisation called "Born to Learn" came at just the right time for me, and may well have been the final tipping point for me to launch into homeschooling. (They mention recent brain research that demonstrates we have evolved to learn through.... playing!)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=falHoOEUfz0>

We practice an eclectic style of homeschooling. We spend some time every week doing workbook-based activities, while ensuring there is plenty of time for the kids to pursue their particular passions. My youngest daughter currently attends Montessori preschool 2 days a week which provides some time for me to focus more completely on the older two children, and this is a good balance for us right now.

We are lucky to live in an area with a very vibrant home schooling community that offers many opportunities for shared classes, activities, excursions and social gatherings together; and our children also transition easily into their regular "extra curricular"/"after school" activities with non-home schooling children (i.e. ballet, soccer, taekwondo, choir). All three of our children thrive on plenty of social contact, so our weekly activities and play sessions with other children (both home schoolers and non) remain an important part of our schedule. My daughter has also just successfully auditioned for the cast of _____, which will be presented by

the Musical Society in November. I am grateful that at 9 years of age she can enjoy the twice-weekly rehearsals that run late into the night, and sleep in the next day as required without being rushed out the door to school in the morning.

Home schooling allows me to notice how intrinsically my children's learning is connected with the real world; there is learning to be had in all sorts of everyday activities such as shopping, gardening, catching the train, tackling home maintenance issues, thinking about how money works, going to bush care group, meal planning and cooking for the family etc. – providing us with ample opportunities for discussion and understanding about what skills are needed later in life and how community works. I am also immensely grateful to be able to share this journey so intimately with my children, and witness their learning and understanding. Childhood is such a brief and precious time and I want to be there for as much of it as I can!

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

Home schooling allows our children to foster their love of learning at their own pace and delve deeply into the areas that interest them most. Our two oldest children are voracious readers, I simply cannot keep up the supply of books (thank goodness for the libraries!), and I am so grateful that home schooling allows them plenty of time to read. My son has a natural affinity for maths and works at a level well above his 7 years of age; while my 9 year old daughter is deeply interested in Greek and Roman mythology; her ongoing study of it is all encompassing and includes an exploration of the food, music, clothing, crafts and cultural activities of Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the mythology and the religious customs of the day.

Because we attend a large number of classes and group activities with other home schoolers, the children are interacting with a wide range of age groups and in an environment where inclusion is facilitated so that children with varied interests, abilities and experiences are encouraged in positive relationships with each other, by the presence of many adults. It also means that they develop friendships based on parameters of personality compatibility and shared interests, rather than solely the "same age" peer groups that predominate in a school setting.

Many, many times we have had people comment on the fact that our children are so comfortable conversing with adults, and seem very comfortable in their own skin. I credit this with the fact that they are learning their social cues from me and the other adults we interact with, rather than witnessing the playground antics that can become rather 'Lord of the Flies' at times; and the fact that they feel fully supported in their social interactions, free to experiment and learn appropriate behaviours under the guidance of a caring adult (when necessary).

Our schooling is directly connected with the world around us; the idea that learning only happens in the home is completely untrue and point blank impossible – our children are learning all the time, wherever we are! We attend classes outside the home on all sorts of topics; last term for example our local home school community classes included CPR training, origami flowers, Lego workshops, ancient history classes (we looked at Egypt, the Vikings and the Celts), cosmetic chemistry (we made lip balm and hair gel).

The children attend theatre productions (either locally or in Sydney, we are frequent visitors to the Sydney Opera House); we visit museums, libraries, playgrounds, historical sites and nature reserves. We attend weekly music lessons, ukulele group, choir, ballet, taekwondo, soccer, drama, Aboriginal dance, and are members of a monthly bush care regeneration group that directly connects the kids with their local environment while they learn to be useful, participating members of society as, well as a good deal of flora and fauna knowledge to boot.

They have hands on knowledge and experience of the value of money, and are entrepreneurial in their attempts to raise money for various causes dear to their heart (whether it be donating to a charity, or purchasing new Lego). Their current favoured method of fund raising is to go busking, utilising their musical skills to great effect!

As for the argument that parents who are not qualified teachers cannot successfully home educate their children, I refute this 100%. There is nobody more in tune with his or her child than the parent. A parent will notice when a child lights up at a particular subject or activity, and will also start to notice the ways in which s/he learns best. And by allowing a child to follow their own interests, and feeding and supporting those interests with appropriate resources, equipment (and when necessary, outside mentors), it becomes more a process of “mentoring a self directed learner” rather than “teaching”. From my perspective this is a much more desirable aim, as it is so empowering for the student.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

As the current registration process in NSW stands, I do not see any benefit to us being registered nor do I think that the process is beneficial to our homeschooling. In fact I find it more of a hindrance, as I spend many weeks leading up to the event thinking about and preparing for registration day. It causes considerable stress to me, and seems unnecessary as the time I spend preparing documents for the BoSTES is time I am not focusing on addressing the needs of my children.

One aspect I have personally found frustrating is the planning requirement. On my last registration visit I explained to our AP that our learning is based on what the children are interested in at the time. Therefore I

don't plan things in advance but respond to the current situation. To show that I could link this style of learning to the appropriate KLA outcomes, I wrote up a few examples of retrospective programs (i.e. linking our learning to outcomes in a retrospective manner, rather than a forward planning manner). She was impressed with the programs, but said that I needed to prepare some advance planning examples "even if I wasn't planning to use them". The idea that I should spend time inventing a study schedule that I knew we would never use, just to satisfy a BoSTES requirement that I demonstrate planning, seems ridiculous to me.

I also believe that the time periods allotted for registration seem to happen in a somewhat arbitrary manner, and those that receive a shortened registration period are not always clear about why this has happened. I would like to see a formalised letter detailing the reasons behind the decision sent to the family immediately after the registration period has been determined.

I would prefer a registration process similar to VIC where the parent registers their commitment to homeschooling and from then on the onus is on the parent/s to provide an appropriate education for their children. My experience is that homeschooling parents choose to home educate because they want the best for their children (howsoever they have arrived at the conclusion that homeschooling is the "best" option for them), so it is my opinion that you won't find more committed or determined "teachers", who are intent on tailoring and delivering an education that suits each individual child. Rather than proving this to BoSTES, we are answerable to our children and the future hopes we have for them. This certainly carries more weight for me.

At the very least, I believe that homeschoolers should be consulted about the registration process (no consultation results in poor regulation), and that the process should be supportive of homeschooling.

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

I believe that Authorised Persons, Registration Officers and Inspectors within the home education unit should be required to demonstrate that they are knowledgeable about home education, understand home education, preferably have personal experience of home education, and are supportive of home education. Home educators should be involved in the training of those assessing home education programs, and interview panels for appointments related to home education regulation should have a home educator on the panel.

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

I wish to provide my children with the highest quality education I can. My first commitment therefore is to my children and not the New South Wales Syllabus. While the Syllabus as it stands can act as guide to establish a benchmark level of age appropriate outcomes and spectrum of topics, I believe that we are providing our children with a far richer learning experience than that which is contained within the Syllabuses; delving

deeply into all key learning areas, simply by being responsive to their children's natural curiosity and connection to the world around them.

Children are naturally inquisitive and come up with all sorts of questions (every day!). Having a supportive adult (i.e. a parent) on hand who is willing to discuss and explore these as they occur provides scope for an enormous amount of learning, in a way that relates directly to the child's interest. To demonstrate here is a list of topics raised by my children over the course of a few days that we discussed, and in most cases explored further:

- Embalming processes / funeral homes and how practices differ in different cultures
- What is an estuary?
- Do snakes poo?
- Why are men macho?
- Air pollution and associated health issues
- What is culture?
- How does fundraising assist cancer research?
- How long is a kilometre?
- Why do we pay library fines?
- If people know that nuclear bombs could destroy the world why were they invented?
- How to act around a person with severe disabilities, even although you might initially feel a bit uncomfortable
- How did the universe begin?

As you can see from this highly edited list of just a few days, we have no trouble covering the Key Learning Areas, simply by being engaged with and responding to the world around us! As the children process the new information, more complex thinking and questioning arises and we follow this through as a natural consequence.

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

I believe that my children's safety, welfare and wellbeing are much more closely attended to and nurtured via homeschooling, rather than at school. My daughter attended school for 2 years before we decided to begin homeschooling, and I saw first hand the confusion, hurt and damage caused by play ground bullying (even although it was not my daughter being targeted). She was definitely affected by what she saw. Sometimes it

would take several weeks for her to bring the subject up with me, by which time the incident was long over and way too late for me to intervene, or bring adult attention to it.

I notice now, because we spend so much time together and she has opportunity to chat to me when she thinks of something, that whenever she has any issues (or incidents she feels uncomfortable about) I hear about them almost straight away, so we can deal with them together or I can ease her fears before she has spent weeks feeling anxious/upset about it.

It seems to me that a lot of school time is about crowd management, rather than individual nurturing. My children are encouraged to develop their own independence and social interactions at a pace that suits them, but I am available if and whenever they need me. I also notice that the children in our homeschooling community seem to be more tolerant of others (I notice this particularly when we are socialising with a mix of homeschooling and non-homeschooling children), they are very open to newcomers or children with obvious 'differences'. At homeschooling events the parents are usually present, so any issues that do arise are dealt with immediately and gently and not left to fester into something larger with children left feeling unsupported.

I do not say this to infer that teachers/schools would not offer support in such incidents, just that with so many under their charge it would be impossible to support each individual in the same way, or to be fully simpatico with their needs (in the way a parent usually is).

I have heard the view expressed that homeschooling children are in danger of neglect or abuse if they are not seen at school every day. I absolutely refute this view as a general stance. We are very active members of our community (as are most of the other homeschoolers we know), and it is a rare day indeed that we do not leave the house at some point. My children are highly visible and interactive in our community and I would argue that they are much more publically visible than a child who spends a majority of their week at school. It is a tragic fact that there are still children who turn up to school every day and continue to be abused at home.

Even although we usually maintain a very busy schedule, homeschooling allows our family to regularly reassess our needs and take time out if necessary. Modern life seems to be full of non-stop 'busyness' these days and it is not always beneficial. I am inspired by these words from Australian psychologist and parenting author Steve Biddulph, to regularly take a break and go slow, if that is what the day seems to need: "If I had to sum up a lifetime of working with families into just six words, that encapsulate where the solution to 90% of our problems lie, these would be the words... Hurry is the enemy of love." Home schooling completely facilitates this kind of flexibility.

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

I certainly believe that home educating families should have access to support that is available to students in government and private schools. For e.g.: access to TVET courses, Open High School, school sports programs and support programs for students with a disability.

I would also love to see part time enrolment at school become an option in NSW; either for access to specific subjects, or to enable parents to consider part time work. I would certainly consider this if it were a legal option in NSW, as I love the home schooling environment we are providing for our children, but it comes at a great financial cost to us as I cannot work. Part time schooling would be one way of providing some balance in this regard.

There seems to be a lack of support for new home educators within the registration process in order for them to make a smooth transition to home schooling. In my experience the registration process seemed entirely overwhelming when I first read the requirements, I had no idea where to start. Luckily I was aware of several local homeschooling groups and knew how to contact them. It was these parents who generously provided me with the assistance and support I needed to successfully put together our first registration documents. Perhaps not everyone feels this way, but I do believe there should be appropriate support available for those who wish to access it.

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

I strongly believe that BoSTES should be required to have a member that represents the home education community. I also feel that all those who are responsible for managing the regulation of home education within BoSTES should be required to have a demonstrated understanding of, and support for, home education.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry and for reading my submission with an open mind.

Yours sincerely,