

Submission
No 247

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Submission addressed to the Inquiry into Home Education in NSW, 2014.

This submission is written to present our family's experience as home educators and of the impacts of system changes that have occurred in recent times. We are not presenting data, research, or legal argument in order to address the Terms of Reference from a broader perspective. For that, we commend the Home Education Australia (HEA) submission to the Committee.

We love home educating our children. We owe a great deal to the community of local families who helped us as we made our way into this new territory many years ago. We now enjoy the social and educational opportunities that this, and the wider Australian community, offer our family. The people we know are resourceful, passionate, caring and entirely committed to their children now and into the future.

Changes surrounding home education policy and practice have been detrimental to our children and our educational practice. Nevertheless, we have been fortunate not to have been impacted as negatively as some other home educators we know.

Terms of Reference

b) The current context of home schooling in NSW including:

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

Although we had considered home education before our son started school, the catalyst for our decision was that the local school he attended was not able to meet his educational needs. The school's response to his differences from his classmates did not inspire confidence and would have left him isolated from his peers. Now both of our children achieve better academic outcomes than would be available *for them, given their learning styles and needs*, at our local schools (this is explained in more detail in terms of reference b)v and vi).

We have found that home education meets more than just academic needs, since it is clear that it provides better social and wellbeing outcomes for the children as well. Home education is responsible for their rekindled and continued love of learning. They are learning to be self-directed, independent learners, who know *how* to learn. Both expect to go to university and we will help them achieve this. Furthermore, their social connections and friendships are strong and our family relationships – both nuclear and extended – have been strengthened, as many family members have contributed to their education.

Our children are too young to be engaged in further education or the formal workforce; however, we expect that our son will undertake some Open University courses soon and both children have developed 'home grown' businesses.

ii) financial costs

There are many and varied expenses associated with home educating. We source specialist materials to meet our children's differing learning styles. We require different resources for each of our children due to their learning differences – thus, we can't 'recycle' all educational materials.

Below is a (partial) list of educational expenses we incur. Many of these are related to experiential learning. Whilst this approach is educationally beneficial for all children, for children with special learning needs (such as our daughter) it is particularly important. Some of these items we are able to access at 'school rates' (at the discretion of the provider), but we pay full price for most. We estimate that we spend more than \$750 per month, on our children's education, without taking into account any loss of income.

- Bravewriter literacy materials and classes (supporting writing development and literary analysis)
- Irlen dyslexic assessment and lenses
- Theatre and workshops, including: Riverside Theatre – various performances, covering many Key Learning Areas; Australian Chamber Orchestra; Opera Australia; National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA); Bell Shakespeare
- Textbooks and equipment (including, but not limited to, geofigures, base 10 blocks, wikistix, spelling games, educational DVDs, a microscope)
- Tutoring
- Audiobook library
- National Parks and Wildlife activities (for example, bush foods walk; animal science walk)
- Piano lessons
- Choir
- Swimming lessons
- Chess – club and tournaments
- Drama
- Art – lessons and program
- Spinning wheel
- Jungle memory (to help improve memory deficits accompanying dyslexia)
- Museum membership
- Loss of income
- Judo lessons
- Rosetta Stone language course
- Online science course
- Science – practical component
- Subscriptions to CSIRO magazines, Scientriffic and The Helix

- Permaculture science
- Savings to government due to not employing institutional schooling, including potential disability funding
- Savings to government because we look after children who would otherwise be in care/specialist care
- Art exhibitions
- Powerhouse Museum workshops and entry fees
- Other excursions (including to Parliament House, Canberra)
- Wildlife ARC membership
- Holiday activities (for example, tennis, singing workshops, museum activities)
- Firewood/utilities

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

Us (parents)

Both parents in our home educating family have degrees. One has degrees in both Social Ecology and Social Work, honours in sociology and is currently completing a doctoral thesis. This parent has been a child protection professional – a DoCS caseworker and specialist caseworker; employed in the regional rollout of Keep Them Safe (KTS); and tutored and lectured at university level, amongst other things.

The other parent has a Bachelor of Arts (Psychology and French Studies) and is intending to complete an honours degree with a view to undertaking a PhD. This parent has also worked with children and young people at risk and their families.

We home educate by choice and for a variety of reasons, providing a creative, flexible and supportive environment which nourishes our children's wellbeing and enhances their academic and social outcomes.

Our Values

We value education highly. We believe that education should enhance students' wellbeing and opportunities, as well as contribute to society. We do not, however, endorse a system that focuses on outcomes and work-readiness to the exclusion of creative thinking and expression (a criticism many commentators have made of contemporary schooling systems). Some children cannot learn in the current model and appear to fail. When their strengths are truly the focus of their educational program, however, they are frequently successful, contributing greatly to their families, community and nation. Good academic outcomes are important to us, however we believe that to achieve the best academic outcomes, the best wellbeing experiences are necessary. Many children suffer greatly in schools, from bullying

or from other abuses; for some children, family can be a safe base from which investigate the world.

We choose to adopt an approach to life in which education is integral and not limited to school hours, and each member is nurtured and enabled to achieve his/her best, academically and otherwise. We want our children to learn how to learn; to love learning and to become lifelong learners. We believe that we are best placed to enact these values for our children. We design our education programs such that they address our children's learning needs and incorporate our family's values – primarily of respect for all. Modern technology greatly facilitates home education, making available the very best resources at the click of a computer key, and we access technology to assist our children's learning.

Our Children

Our children have different educational needs from each other and from the average student. One is gifted, one has a learning difference. We believe both are best served by home education, since we provide our children with a learning environment that is tailored to their needs. We present more about them as people and learners, in our response to the Term of Reference 1.(b)(v) 'characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children.'

Experiences of school

We acknowledge that there are many excellent schools and excellent school teachers; some are friends and family members. Indeed, we have sought help and advice from them and been encouraged by their support. However, we want our children to experience a qualitatively different type of education, which we choose to provide within our family and the wider community.

In general, we support the stated ethos of the public education system – diversity, inclusivity, allowing each child to achieve his/her best in a safe environment. However, schools don't achieve these outcomes for every student. In practice, the culture in schools is frequently at variance with our values; there is a narrow definition of inclusivity and diversity; bullying is often beyond the school's capacity to address; learning needs are ignored. We make these statements based on personal experience with our son's school and other schools we investigated, although he himself was not impacted by all these issues. We have both witnessed, and are aware of through conversations with other parents, difficulties created by the institutional context.

Our experience of school was one of being let down. The principal was more focused on paperwork and policy than on meeting children's needs. The response to our son's giftedness was insufficient. A child in our son's class was identified as having a learning disability by the school counsellor. The following year when her parents inquired about why the support she had previously received was no longer provided, they were stonewalled.

The school counsellor was no longer helpful. They subsequently contacted the principal whose response was that the disability didn't exist; the school counsellor had been instructed not to assist. The response from the Department of Education to this family's request for assistance was that 'some children just fall through the cracks and yours will be one of them.' Further, one of us witnessed an incidence of severe bullying and wrote a letter incorporating a clear witness statement. The incident was witnessed by the victim's father, as well as an after school care worker. Unfortunately, no action was taken.

The BoSTES has guidelines for schools that encourage school principals to take increasing control of children, and which interfere with parental rights; for instance, the power to disallow parents' taking their children out of school for a day or week. We think that this is unacceptable. We know of parents who keep their children home for many reasons (we would if we employed the school system). These reasons include providing educational opportunities that the school cannot or will not provide; travel; family visits where there is extensive distance to cover; 'mental health days' in order to provide respite for a struggling or bullied child. We believe that these are reasonable actions and should be left to the parents' discretion. It seems, from our experience with our son's school and other schools that we have investigated, that parents are no longer partners with schools; indeed, our experience is that some schools treat parents and students with contempt, a circumstance which is in direct conflict with our values of respect for all.

We reiterate that there are many wonderful teachers and schools. Schools and home schools are different, yet each of these educational streams fills an important need. We believe that the two are complementary and can comfortably co-exist. Unfortunately, we have witnessed some very negative occurrences in schools, some of which we have outlined here. It would take too long to list all the positives we have personally experienced, and it would not help the committee to understand our motivations for home educating our children. Suffice it to say that, even if every school and every teacher were excellent, we would continue to home educate because our negative experiences with schools are not the driving force in our choice to embrace fully our responsibility to provide for our children's education.

iv) extent of and reasons for unregistered home schoolers

Although we are registered home educators, we believe the following might give an indication of why some families choose not to register. We are successful home educators, borne out by the fact that we have undergone six registrations and received the maximum possible registration period (two years) at each, as well as by our children's academic and personal achievements. In the past, we have received notice that we were required to register by documentation (that is, we were considered to be experienced and capable home educators and the then Office of the Board of Studies deemed it unnecessary to inspect our physical home school). Our past experiences had been so affirming that we preferred to register via a visit. Because our youngest child was due for initial registration, and initial registrations occur via home visit, we were able to arrange one.

Changes to the requirements for registration have become more and more restrictive since we began home educating, almost a decade ago. Our educational practice has become increasingly constrained – focused on completing all the tasks in a text book rather than engaging with educational moments as they naturally arise – and it has become more difficult to teach in the manner best suited to our children’s needs. Registration, and the lead up to it, has become increasingly stressful. The Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES) has little understanding of home education practices (which differ substantially from those in schools, since the different environments require different management), and many of the staff of BoSTES are so disrespectful and inconsistent that we would prefer not to engage with the current registration process. Nevertheless, we will apply for re-registration when the time comes. We will present our approach to education in the way that expresses it most clearly from our perspective. Should we be unsuccessful or be given a registration period of short duration, we will not stop home educating our children, despite the possibility of sanction, as it is the best educational approach for them. If we are constrained by rigid requirements for registration that have a deleterious effect on their education, we will not comply.

We cannot speak for currently unregistered home educating families. However, the current regulatory system is inappropriate (see Terms of Reference c)i) and v)); we would never have expected to consider not registering, but the current regime has resulted in us consciously discussing this possibility. When so many otherwise law-abiding citizens break the law, it is an indication of a problem with that law, or with the enforcement of that law, or (in this case) with the BoSTES’ policies.

v) characteristics and educational needs of home educated children

The characteristics and special needs of home educated children cover the full gamut that exists in society. It is, however, true to say that there is a large number of children with special needs in the home educating community. These needs include, but are not limited to, learning differences (difficulties; giftedness); medical issues; and conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), diagnosed in some children who have been fostered and adopted, and who have experienced trauma early in life. Although it is not always the case, some families that begin to home educate due to their children’s learning difficulties, find that a home education environment vitiates these difficulties, which resolve into learning *differences*.

Our home educating journey began because our son is gifted. School tried to some extent to meet his needs, suggesting acceleration, he was more than one year advanced in some areas and not in others. Instead, he was extended within his existing class. This resulted in his being isolated in the classroom. The school had a trained gifted and talented (GAT) teacher who was not used in that capacity. When a composite class was created, troublemakers were placed in it, rather than GAT students. Our son’s self-esteem became tied to giftedness; he never made errors at school because he was academically years in advance of his grade. When he began home education, he was able to work at his own level/s (ahead in some areas, behind in others – a quite common pattern among children but one not easily

accommodated in school). It took time for him to feel that it was alright to make errors; however, he began slowly to understand that for learning to occur, mistakes were necessary.

We accessed the University of NSW (UNSW) Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) and other programs to support his learning. We continue to access external resources, for example, a maths and economics tutor, music teacher, swimming instruction, drama classes, book club at the local library, chess club, choir and online education courses. The flexibility of home education also allowed him the time to uncover interests and to start a business.

Our son sat the UNSW International Competitions and Assessments for Schools (ICAS) exams over several years and received predominantly high distinctions and distinctions. He is now 13 and is completing year 10 maths and studying year 11 economics. At 14 or 15, he will move to Open University in some subjects, and remain home educating for others in which he is less advanced. This combination of learning environments will extend his experience and allow him to learn at his level in all areas.

Our 9 year old daughter has a type of dyslexia, a visual-perceptual dysfunction known as Scotopic Sensitivity/Irlen Syndrome. This is not an optical dysfunction, but a difficulty with processing visual information. It affects study, reading, writing, spelling and focus, and she has difficulty remembering what she has learnt unless she has a special interest in the topic which helps her to maintain the stamina required to process information and retain it. Irlen Syndrome is a learning disability, but she is a highly intelligent child and learns well in a home education context in which she has more control over her studies and is able to rest when needed. She has never been to school. Even so, spending time with friends who were both younger and prolific readers led her to become distressed, and thence angry, and she made a decision to stop learning to read. Once comparison was minimised, and with much one-on-one teaching using specialist materials, she became an avid reader. Nevertheless, it took care and time to rebuild her self-esteem; this remains an ongoing process.

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

Home education is not the same as school. We see our roles as teachers and *facilitators* of our children's education. Increasingly, as our children's skills develop, we engage a range of educational strategies. These include employing tutors; enrolling in online courses; exchanging expertise with other parents and mentors; undertaking activities outside the home; and allowing the children to develop their own projects.

Home education allows great flexibility to design learning opportunities to suit our children's learning styles. For example, at home we have the ability to spend time on our daughter's strengths, rather than spending all her 'school' time on remedial work. As well as being educationally beneficial, this has been instrumental in rebuilding her self-esteem. An ability to focus on aural, oral and hands-on learning and creativity, in an environment free from constant comparison, have enabled her intelligence and love of learning to shine. She has

studied animal anatomy through dissections (this would not occur until high school in an institutional setting). She is a carer with Wildlife ARC, a wildlife rescue organisation. These provide her with a hands-on way to pursue her love of animal science and she learns about habitats and the importance of caring for our environment in the process. Pursuing educational activities that would be encountered much later at school allows her to engage in learning of which she is capable (in fact, at which she is very good). This keeps her interested and is enabling without in any way referencing her learning difference.

Allowing our daughter to pursue interests such as those mentioned above has led to improved reading, writing and spelling outcomes, whilst she has been focused on topics about which she is passionate. This ability to follow her interests vitiates her learning disability. It is important to note that under the current BoSTES regulations, we must seek BoSTES' consent before adapting her education program beyond what has been approved during registration. Such a requirement is educationally detrimental and administratively nonsensical. It places compliance above educational benefit and requires someone with no knowledge of our daughter to make decisions about her learning. In order for her to learn effectively and efficiently, it is essential that we respond to learning opportunities as they arise.

Many families we know have responded to unexpected, unplanned, learning opportunities. We know of families who have been able to find specialist mentors in the wider community (one child was invited to present at a university conference, having developed her expertise in her area of interest). In addition to this, parents within the home education community have a range of different skills, which we draw on as a group. This is enabling and enriching. We participate in many joint activities with other families. We arrange excursions together, create groups of two or three families to study together, and sometimes meet in larger groups for specific subjects, such as writing, drama, music, as well as enrolling the children in after-school programs, and so on. They have many safe adults they know who will watch out for them and who they could call on if needed. We think that schools would like to be experienced like this, but for many children this is not the case.

In home education, learning happens anywhere and anytime. Some of our best learning occurs during car trips. We read stories, discuss them and respond to them, create poems about them and learn grammar, amongst other things. This happens easily in the car because it becomes a family activity and game; when we have tried to undertake the same activities in a 'classroom' environment they do not lead to the same creative and positive outcomes.

C) Regulatory framework for homeschooling including:

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

Our response to this term of reference starts by covering the specific steps and requirements of registering for home education in NSW. Following this, some of the recent changes to the requirements are discussed. Finally, we will provide some examples of the

ways in which these changes have impacted negatively on us. These are aspects of the registration process that concern us deeply. In many ways the appropriateness of the regulatory framework are implicated in these issues. As such some aspects of that Term of Reference (c)(iv) are addressed here.

According to the BoSTES' *Information Package 2013* (IP, 2013), the process of registering for home schooling involves the following key steps:

- parent submits application
- Authorised Person (AP) assesses application by home visit
- AP makes a recommendation
- if the application is approved, a certificate of registration is issued specifying the conditions of registration
- if the application is not approved, the decision may be appealed.

The process may take up to three months from the date of lodgment of an application, and (according to that same document) the requirements for registration include that:

- the educational program is based on the curriculum specified in the Education Act 1990, that is, the minimum curriculum for primary education (Kindergarten to Year 6), the minimum curriculum for secondary education (Year 7 to Year 10) or the curriculum for beyond Year 10 (Year 11 and Year 12) (Note: the minimum curriculum is the curriculum specified by the relevant Board of Studies syllabuses. Part 4 of the IP (2013) details the curriculum requirements.)
- the educational program is based on, and taught in accordance with, the relevant Board of Studies syllabuses
- the educational program identifies the intended learning outcomes based on the relevant Board of Studies syllabuses and relevant content
- the educational program is suitable to cater for the identified learning needs of the child
- there is an adequate system of planning, supervising and recording teaching and learning experiences
- there is an adequate system for recording the child's progress and achievement
- the time allocated to learning is sufficient to allow coverage of the curriculum and is comparable to the time allocated by schools
- the home learning environment is suitable for effective home schooling
- the resources within the home and those accessed externally are adequate to support the learning needs of the child

We experience this system as over-prescriptive. Many of the requirements are burdensome and some are outside the mandate of the legislation (an example of the latter, for instance, being the requirement to replicate school time-frames in a home education setting). Moreover, some of these requirements are counterproductive to our children's learning.

We have undergone six registration inspections and received the maximum possible registration period at each. We are very experienced and successful home educators. Our experience of registration has gone from generally positive and affirming to stressful and constraining, particularly in more recent times. We have been placed in a bind by being compelled both to cater for the educational needs of our children (which we do), and implement the exact requirements for registration, because they are often mutually exclusive requirements.

The changes in registration process have been incremental, occurring over several years, but came to a head with the implementation, and later publication of, the IP (2013). They were undertaken without consultation with home educators and were delivered as a fait-accompli. The consequences of the changes were communicated in a misleading manner to home educators (when communicated at all) and many APs did not really understand them. This confusion was increased by the BoSTES' publication of an online Questions and Answers document, because it directly contradicted the IP (2013) in places. Where such contradictions occurred, the IP (2013) was not adjusted; thus, the original problematic changes remain official policy. Whilst this situation was difficult for experienced home educators, it was particularly so for new home educators attempting to register. A description of some of these changes and how they have impacted on us or people we know, is presented below.

The IP (2013) stipulates that home schoolers must allocate comparable time to each syllabus outcome as is allocated in schools. This is not a change in the most recent IP but it does fail to take into account home education circumstances. Home educators do not spend time on classroom management and consequently need less time to cover the same material. This stipulation also contravenes best practice with children who are gifted, who will disengage from learning when required to spend time reviewing work they have already mastered (information from GERRIC¹ workshop). It would seem sensible that any time remaining could be used to extend the child or pursue *other* interests. The package, though, only allows adaptation to the child's needs if this is planned for, and approved, in the registration process. Because of this, we cannot 'strike while the iron is hot.' Additionally, suggesting a time allocation goes against the Education Act 1990.

Conversely, there are aspects of learning upon which we have to spend more than the specified time in order to meet the learning needs of our children. Although a BoSTES inspector assured us that the NSW syllabus time specifications allowed ample opportunity for coverage of the syllabus stage content to occur, that is not always the case. Our dyslexic child often requires more time than average to absorb lessons; were we to complete every syllabus outcome prior to allowing her to pursue her interests, we would never get to those most inspiring aspects of her learning. Ironically, in pursuing her interests, we often cover

¹ GERRIC (Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre) is located at the University of NSW.

syllabus outcomes in half the time it would ordinarily take, and *without* her otherwise subsequent loss of self-esteem and resistance to education.

The IP (2013) also states that a child will be registered for a particular year level. This would seem to be an inconsequential requirement, but when you understand that our children function across a range of year levels in different subjects, you will understand how impossible this is. Our children have always been registered generically for 'primary' and 'secondary' schooling, which has considerably mitigated this constraint.

Clearly, the IP (2013) restricts home educators' ability to be flexible and choose the best manner in which to address their children's educational needs. Another example of the issues is that it is expressly stated that the full NSW BoSTES' curriculum must be delivered, in the child's home and by the parent²; that the means of meeting each outcome must be stipulated in advance (which effectively removes the options for natural learning and eclectic educational approaches); and that external activities can only be supplementary to the program delivered in the home. This is at odds with other educational settings, such as schools, where no one teacher is expected to deliver quality education across the entire curriculum. Further, the expectation that children will be retained in the home for their education prevents learning facilitated by specialists (e.g. tutors or accessing specific courses) and learning which is integrated with community and life in general.

Illustrating further changes to the kind of home education practice that we can undertake, there were key sentences absent in the IP (2013) which had been included in the 2011 Information Package - to wit:

As with other forms of education there is no single approach to home schooling. Some home educators have a structured approach that is based upon a set timetable and formal instruction. Others prefer an approach that is less formal and responds to the child's developing interests and needs.

In contrast with the current system in NSW, which has led us seriously to consider not registering, some jurisdictions have systems that encourage home educating families to register. At one time, QLD had a very low number of families registered; however, that state adopted a new system, one which was supportive and recognised the efficacy of many different approaches to registration. This acknowledgement and support led to a substantial increase in registered families. Whilst we cannot speak for unregistered families in NSW, we believe that an improved system would reduce the number of unregistered home educators.

(ii) Training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons

We have had four visits from APs for the purpose of home education registration (which has equated to six registrations). The best visits have been with APs who were supportive of home education, were interested to know about us, our children, what we do and what our children had accomplished, and were not looking at us through a 'school' lens. The worst

² See page 8 of the *Information Package 2013*.

ones were when we felt the AP was more interested in seeing a school-like program and wanting to check that we had the next two years' education mapped out and correlated with BoSTES Syllabus outcomes, rather than showing an interest in the children's learning.

In our experience of supporting other families to register for home education, and during our own registration visits, it has become clear that there is no consistency in the ways in which APs implement policy and conduct registration visits. Some are disrespectful and appear to have inadequate knowledge of home education philosophies, practices and methodologies. Others can be pleasant but seem unclear about BoSTES' policies or about the Education Act (1990), which causes confusion and misunderstanding.

We believe that, in addition to extensive knowledge of a diverse range of pedagogical paradigms, APs should be fundamentally supportive of home education, and be conversant with the nature of its delivery (in all its diversity). Current APs seem to be chosen for an ability to undertake school inspections and this is not appropriate for home education registration. Some current APs have also demonstrated an ignorance of special needs and ways of addressing them (including one who had never heard of dyslexia). This is troubling given the large percentage of home educated students who have special needs. Regrettably, senior inspectors have also exhibited this ignorance.

In order to prevent these problems the selection criteria, selection processes and ongoing training for APs should change. Applicants should be required to demonstrate an understanding of, and support for, home education. There should be a home educator involved in all aspects of AP selection. Ultimately, however, we would advocate for an entirely separate body to oversee home education.

(iii) Adherence to delivery of the New South Wales Syllabuses

As stated at the outset of this submission, we value education highly. We find that we agree with the inherent foci, values and subject areas of the National Curriculum, though are less sympathetic to the NSW rendition of it. We have a number of serious issues with the structure of the NSW version and oppose NSW home educators being compelled to implement its full content, scope and sequence. It is our experience that the Stage Statements provide the most accessible, useful and sufficient guide for us when seeking to 'teach' the NSW syllabuses.

Our eclectic approach to education involves planning and structuring many educational experiences with an eye to the syllabus outcomes, but we also allow significant scope to pursue a more natural learning approach, where the children's interests provide the impetus to explore a specific learning area and our role is to extend and enhance their learning. These learning activities invariably link to syllabus outcomes, but we are flexible about the timelines involved and cannot plan them in advance. As a result of this, we are better able to demonstrate the learning that has occurred, rather than saying in advance how particular content areas will be covered.

We find it nonsensical that we must plan and document components of everyday life that happen to have syllabus outcomes attached to them. For example, it is a Stage 4 (year 7/8) outcome for a student to be able to buy a loaf of bread. Our 9 year old daughter could do that years ago and having to provide it as a 'tick-off' outcome is ridiculous. There are extensive illustrations where outcomes in the Syllabus reflect pro-social values such as being able to listen to others, consider them, negotiate and compromise. Whilst we are very aware that some children do not have the opportunity to experience these things, regulating every aspect of life is not a positive solution.

We object to changes to the requirements for registration that have sought to limit the ways in which we can teach and which endeavour to restrict us to the scope and sequence of the NSW Syllabuses. As already stated, we also object to mandated time periods for each subject, since home educators can frequently cover required material more quickly than can schools. The application of mandatory time periods for delivery of educational outcomes is expressly forbidden in the Education Act (1990). Home educators ought to be allowed to manage educational delivery without reference to anything other than their children's learning needs. Moreover, in the NSW version of the National Curriculum some outcomes are repeated unnecessarily, or introduced in earlier stages than for the rest of Australia. This has led to a crowded curriculum in NSW, which students 'skate over.' A child with learning differences (difficulties) does not mix well with a crowded curriculum. We have found the NSW Foundation Statements to be the most user-friendly rendition of the Syllabus. We believe that the scope, sequence and manner of delivery should be left to the parent-teacher to decide.

(iv) Potential benefits and impediments to children's wellbeing and safety

We are concerned by the seeming conflation of home education and child abuse. There is no reason to suppose that home educated children are more at risk of harm than those in schools, nor that abuse would be less likely to be detected, since home education does not take place in isolation. Furthermore, in practice (if not in law³), failure to register for home education does not indicate child abuse.

In general, the home educated child comes into contact with a plethora of people, some of whom will inevitably be mandatory reporters. Ironically, strict implementation of current BoSTES' policies would restrict activities and isolate families and, coupled with exclusions from educational programs, this cannot contribute positively to children's wellbeing or safety.

Our experience is that home educated children's safety, welfare and wellbeing are of paramount concern to their parents and that home education is a positive means of achieving these. The social interactions of children in the home educating community are

³ This is in reference to the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998, where failing to register for home education can qualify as a condition for reporting 'risk of significant harm' to Community Services – Chapter 3, Part 2, Paragraph 23 (b1).

seldom afflicted some of the complex and harmful interactions which can be a feature of schooling. At the same time, there is sufficient interaction with other young people and adults that our children easily develop social skills and resilience.

Finally, children are demonstrably not always safe in schools and institutions. It should be emphasised that connections with family are largely protective. Some of the misconceptions surrounding home educated children's (lack of) safety are fuelled by prejudice and misinformation; unfortunately, these attitudes have a real negative impact on families.

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

In Australia, regulation of home education occurs at a state and territory level and requirements for registration differ across jurisdictions. Regulatory regimes can be enabling or disabling of home education practice. Disabling regulatory regimes result from a lack of positive policy and legislation which is entrenched by misunderstandings of home education by regulatory bodies and the school-oriented inspectors responsible for their oversights. We believe strongly that the current regulatory system in NSW is highly inappropriate and detrimental to parent-educators and to children's welfare and educational outcomes.

APs, who assess registration applications, are the current 'face' of regulation. These officials are directed to monitor home educators' compliance with registration requirements. This focus is written into the *Authorised Persons Handbook* (BoSTES 2013), along with the directive that they are not to provide support to home educating families and that the provision of advice is at their discretion. These features are the heart of our negative experience of regulation – compliance is the proxy for educational quality, and monitoring, rather than support, is the focus of interactions.

Our concerns about regulation stem from its current form in NSW, not a desire to abandon it altogether. We would welcome a system of registration that is supportive rather than inspectorial and punitive; a system focused on our children's abilities and achievements rather than box-ticking, where parents are scrutinised for compliance rather than recognized for their efforts and achievements.

We believe that there are many simple things that can be done to improve the current system. To this end we have presented some recommendations at the end of this document.

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

Home educated children are excluded from some educational programs and activities that are available to all other children in NSW (both publicly and privately educated children; in one case, children from Papua New Guinea have access that the home educated do not). These programs include TVET courses provided for high school children through TAFE;

language courses provided by the NSW Department of Education; NSW Department of Education school programs for inpatients in hospitals; inter-school competitions, such as chess tournaments; and elite sporting activities.

An example of an exclusion that affects our family is not having access to the Department of Education (foreign) language school; another, the inability to enrol in part-time schooling, which we considered and sought at one point and which other Australian jurisdictions allow. The public school principal we approached was supportive of the idea, but reported that she was instructed to deny access because of a belief that all home educators would pursue such an option. We also know of a student who has broken the national swimming record in her event, yet cannot access the School Sports program.

There are some services to which we do have access (such as school dentist), but information about this is not provided, thus creating a barrier. We were not informed that there were vaccinations available in year 7; because we did not immunise our son in year 7, we now have to pay for his immunisations should we choose to go ahead with them. It would also be of help to receive information regarding access to travel concession cards for home educated students who are over 16 years of age. Whilst our local home educating group includes many long-term home educators who can offer advice about resolving issues when relevant professionals don't provide the information or are ignorant, it is a hit-and-miss approach and relies on an experienced community of home educating parents. It would be helpful for parents to receive information from the regulatory body regarding supports that are available to them.

It would also be valuable and appropriate to be kept up to date with changes that are occurring in the BoSTES or other Departments that could have an effect on home education. This would not constitute support, but rather reflect a reasonable and equitable relationship between the registering body and families who home educate. That same communication, if distributed at a regional or local level, could include links to local educational opportunities.

In many cases there is no access to support and sharing information would not address this. There is little government support for home educated students with special needs, and accessing private support can be prohibitively expensive. We might have found it useful to have an initial consultation with a school counsellor regarding our children's special needs. Without access to a school counsellor in the first instance, we have had to access this professional assistance privately. There are times when we ask ourselves if this is not part of an overall exclusionary or punitive attitude towards home education. When considered in the light of other exclusions, it would appear possible that this punitive approach is designed to make home educating difficult, perhaps with the aim of discouraging parents from adopting this pathway.

(e) Representation of home schoolers within BoSTES

Home education should not be regulated by the BoSTES; a separate body should be established for this purpose (see, for example, the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council, THEAC). However, whilst-so-ever home education is overseen by the BoSTES home educators should be represented thereon.

In a Parliamentary response to a question, the Minister for Education stated that not everyone can be represented on the BoSTES. Yet, every other educational stake holder is. Given that the BoSTES is currently responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW, it should be a requirement that home educators be represented. Furthermore, any home educator on the BoSTES should be chosen by home educators through a home education peak body.

(f) Any other related matter

We have presented much about us, our children, and our approach to home education. We have appreciated this opportunity to present the issues that matter to us about home education and things that we hope will be addressed as a result of this Inquiry. In conclusion, we would like to draw the committee's attention to a small number of matters that have not been mentioned elsewhere.

Firstly, we would like to see any reference, in policy or legislation, to 'home schooling' changed to 'home education'. We believe that reference to 'home schooling' creates misunderstandings about what home education is. As shown above, the two are vastly different.

Secondly, home educated students cannot be validly compared to school educated students via assessment tools such as NAPLAN, because the differences between these cohorts are significant. Home educated children may follow a different scope and sequence and furthermore, the home educated group has a higher incidence of students with learning differences. It would be more useful to assess outcomes of those who have finished their education and are working or undertaking further study. Research thus far indicates that home educated students do well in further study and work.

Thirdly, other jurisdictions allow interim registration to ensure that home educating families have a legal status whilst they are going through the process of registration and 'finding their feet'. One benefit of this is that it facilitates immediate withdrawal from school which is especially important when a child is bullied and there has been an inadequate response. We know at least five children who were withdrawn from school after becoming suicidal; this is not a rare occurrence. In all these cases, the children are now safe, happy and thriving emotionally, mentally, academically and socially. We are concerned that if the current registration practices are not amended, a child may die. Children develop resilience in response to a certain amount of difficulty or challenge; too much, and permanent damage will occur.

We are passionate about our children and about home education – not as the only right way to educate, but as an equal educational choice. We are participating in this Inquiry in the hope that a better system will result. The home education we deliver and that we observe in the families we know is more reflective of great education approaches around the world (such as in Finland) and

reflective of the aspirations for Australia's education systems, as described in *The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

Recommendations:

- Home education should be recognised as an equal education option, alongside government and non-government schools. This should be demonstrated through active support and a seat for home educators on the BoSTES.
- Proven home educators should have the potential to be registered for up to five years, as schools are able to be.
- Regulatory practices should be formulated with widespread and real consultation with stakeholders (home educators).
- Inspectors should behave in a professional manner at all times.
- When an application to home educate is rejected reasons in writing should be mandatory.
- Regulatory practices should be informed by knowledge of the needs of home educating families and students, special needs, trauma recovery (for example, for a child who has been bullied).
- Regulations should not be unduly prescriptive, as the needs of many students cannot be met by a prescriptive system. There *is* a requirement to meet students' needs (and after all, that is the most common reason for choosing to home educate). A prescriptive regulatory system makes this impossible and is contrary to the Melbourne Declaration and the BoSTES' own guidelines.
- Any reference in policy or legislation, to 'home schooling' should be changed to 'home education'.
- Interim registration should be available from the point at which a parent applies to the registering body for home education.