

## INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

**Name:** Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

1st August, 2014

Legislative Council Home Schooling Inquiry

My name is . I am a registered Home Educator and former secondary school teacher (Humanities) with 14 years of experience in this profession. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. I hope that my input may be of assistance to you and the Home Education Community.

**I request that my contact details remain available only to committee members and not made available to the general public please.**

I would like to address the following terms of reference:

- b) The current context of home schooling in NSW including:
  - i) Outcomes of home schooling in relation to transition to further study and work.

Home Education allows us to develop, deliver and access opportunities and resources that meet the individual developmental needs and interests of our child. Thus, one major advantage of home education is that our child is able to progress at a pace that is meaningful according to her development. For example, instead of having to do mathematics at grade one level – she is able to work at grade 3 and beyond. There is true flexibility that respects the individual's ability, interests and needs. The positive outcome with regard to this is that our daughter is highly motivated to learn material that is relevant and meaningful as it is specifically appropriate to her. Skills and knowledge are retained and extended due to this.

Home education allows our daughter to socialise and integrate into the wider community along with her family, elders, peers and those who are younger. One major reason we chose to home educate is the belief that it places our daughter within the wider community allowing her to participate in the world as an everyday norm. The outcome is a very social minded, kind and strong individual who is positive about learning and her place in society.

## ii) Financial costs

We consider the education of our daughter an investment that will hopefully result in her happiness, health and success. As the primary carer in our family, I have forgone my income as a senior teacher in order to mother and educate our daughter. We are fortunate financially, and so have access to any resource and opportunity our daughter requires.

## iii) Demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children

I am a former teacher with 14 years experience. I have a Bachelor of Education (with Hons) and a Master of Education. My husband has a number of post-graduate qualifications. Why would we home educate?

We did not set out to home educate – we set out to find the best school that we could for our daughter. Placing a high priority on our daughter's education, we did our research and explored what was available. We began by attending school open days in our area, speaking to principals, teachers and parents about the school. I kept reading and researching education widely and I reflected constantly upon what our daughter was showing us as she developed. Eventually, we decided that home education was the best form of education available due to the following reasons:

- Our daughter is bright and intrinsically motivated to learn – thus she has the right attitude and ability to learn outside of an institutional setting. Home Education suits this child's abilities and spirit.
- We wanted to provide a curriculum that suited our daughter's abilities, interests and needs.
- We wanted to provide learning environments that were beautiful, diverse, stimulating and challenging.
- I enjoyed teaching and being with my daughter- it seemed natural to continue with this as it was successful during the no-school years in which she had started reading, writing and basically completed Kindergarten outcomes at age 4.
- My educational background gave me the knowledge, skill and confidence to take on responsibility for our daughter's education and development.
- No teacher or school, no matter how noble, is able to love our daughter or feel the same depth of commitment to her well-being and education as we do.
- Our daughter has an excellent teacher to student ratio – that fosters very in depth learning without the many distractions that exist within the school environment.

- Access to technology makes it possible to teach and learn anything. More than ever, it is becoming increasingly easier and feasible to educate and work outside of a school model of education.
- Home education provides a safer environment.
- We could guide our daughter's development within social situations and take responsibility for her moral development.
- We can teach topics and subjects that are not available in some schools.
- We can exercise quality control – we choose the tutors and hire or fire depending upon their performance.
- Greater freedom to employ diverse strategies for learning and respect our daughter's interests.
- Better attention to good nutrition, sleep and hygiene are possible.
- We remain integral in our daughter's life – we don't become increasingly alienated from her daily experiences. Family is not replaced by strangers, an institution or peers. We think a lot of damage results from our society increasingly institutionalising its children and elderly.
- We believe home education provides rich, realistic and more diverse opportunities to socialise within the wider community. We believe that school segregates children from the community in an artificial manner which is damaging them and fostering anti-social behaviours and a decline in academic standards.
- Home education fosters family and community relationships.
- It is lots of fun being together; helping and watching our child develop is a great gift and joy as a parent. Family relationships, love and security are powerful foundations for real learning to occur.

We follow the NSW Syllabuses. However, we are able to include learning that goes beyond this curriculum because we have the time, motivation and freedom to do so. Along with my own input, we employ a combination of strategies to learn. These include: private tutors; excursions; attendance at performances; participation in many weekly academic, social and sporting groups both within and beyond the home education network; online programs such as Maths Online, Studyladder and Reading Eggs to name a few. Everyday the nature of learning and social commitments are such that we spend at least part of the day outside of the home. We do not view home education as meaning we must be at home – under some form of house arrest with only mum as the teacher. On the contrary, home education is about being in the community, exploring the world and utilising resources beyond the home and family. It is a very open education.

iv) Extent and reasons for unregistered home schoolers

I am a registered home educator and I actually believe that the majority of home educators do register and support appropriate standards and regulations. However, I can say that there was a moment when I did contemplate remaining unregistered and this was why:

- Being assessed by any authority figure, even for someone like myself who is an experienced teacher, feels intimidating.
- Being assessed and monitored by an authorised person representing a form of education that we reject is potentially problematic.
- Concern that legislation may restrict educational choice. Certain countries, particularly in Europe, have banned home education and persecuted children/families who have insisted on their right to choose the education for their child. If one doesn't register, our educational choice is protected regardless of any changes to requirements and/or legislation.
- The concern that the authorised person would be anti-home schooling or limited in their knowledge of educational research in this area.
- Fear of having my application for registration rejected and therefore having to challenge the system further.
- The feeling that it would not only be our educational plans that were being assessed – but that we would be scrutinised as parents simply due to our educational choice.

v) Characteristics and educational needs of home schooled children

Our daughter has not been tested for giftedness – but both we and also the authorised person who assessed us for registration believe this is the case. Our daughter achieved many developmental milestones very early and easily. At present, she is 6 years old and happily coping with work beyond grade 1. Home education allows her to work at a level that suits her ability interests and learning style. She is thriving in this environment as she can pursue interests and subjects in depth which is vital for a child such as her. She is able to assume some responsibility and independence for her learning – this is inspiring and motivating.

Our daughter is also very social – this became apparent in her early years. Home education allows very healthy socialisation as children have a high adult/child ratio making guidance in the social sphere strong. Home education allows our daughter to mix with people of all ages and backgrounds rather than being categorised according to age. Socialising happens through participation in family, play dates; learning co-ops, sport, drama, excursions, travel, ballet and music. One of the strengths of home education is the positive social experiences and outcomes available to this very social kid.

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

Home education embraces many different philosophies and methods of education it is a diverse movement. As a well qualified and experienced former teacher, I am often amused that people believe one must be in school in order to learn and make friends. With regard to learning technology is changing this dramatically – almost anyone with commitment to do so- can teach and learn anything. The community and its resources play a large part in home education enhancing learning and social experiences.

Many people believe home education means kids are locked up at home, sitting at a desk with mum or dad as the instructor. Some home educators adopt a ‘school at home’ approach – others reject this. It is very important that the institutional model of education designed for large numbers of children not be superimposed on home education. I educate one child – this allows a different model than what was available and useful to me when educating many people within a school.

We incorporate some traditional classroom/school approaches, but we differ from this model by incorporating inquiry based learning that is based upon many excursions, personal interests and outdoor exploration. Our home education involves, quite often, not being at home and accessing community resources such as museums, theatre, environment, zoos, historic sites, home education learning co-ops....It is important that those entrusted with assessing home educators don’t insist on imposing models of learning that were designed for a school setting. Education within a family/community setting – is different. It can’t be expected that home educated kids be mostly at home or that they complete 5-6 hours of formal lessons a day, or that they follow the curriculum according to their age. This is a model for schools dealing with masses and fitting in with business hours. When you teach one on one, more can be accomplished with less and more flexible time; different strategies and environments are possible and required. Home education adopts many strategies as long as outcomes are achieved and progress is demonstrated, I think there should be room to accept a free market of educational philosophies and the right of parents and children to make choices that promote their learning.

c) Regulatory framework for home schooling including:

ii) Training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons

The Authorised Person who visited me was very positive about home education and had a pleasant demeanor. I had worked very hard presenting programs, detailed daily learning/outcomes, work samples etc... so the AP was impressed. I believe in standards and appropriate monitoring for both schools and home education. However, it is important that all home educators can be confident that APs are in general supportive of this form of education. APs need to be well-read about home education philosophies and relevant educational research in this area. Hearing other stories of registration experiences I believe there is some inconsistency among APs regarding their understanding of their role; their understanding as to the extent of their power; their interpretation of requirements and knowledge of educational research relevant to home education.

I believe that when APs apply for their job that members of the home education community should be able to be part of the interview process. We ought to have the right to know that we are liaising with a person of integrity who understands and respects this form of education. If people were confident of such attitudes, maybe some unregistered home educators would have more trust that the system is supportive.

There are many former professional educators who home educate – I would estimate that within the home education community, at least a third of parents are former teachers. Why not utilise these people who understand both worlds to act as APs or as liaison people?

### iii) Adherence to the delivery of the NSW Syllabuses

I follow the NSW Syllabuses but also incorporate subjects, outcomes and topics that aren't covered by this prescribed curriculum. The syllabuses have much strength which I embrace, however they should never be considered above and beyond criticism. If the syllabuses were perfect we wouldn't change them so often. So, for me it is a balancing act between what is prescribed by the State, what my child needs, and what I think constitutes valuable learning.

Steiner schools are permitted to have a very alternative national curriculum, including delaying teaching kids to read before age 7. One could argue that this does not match the NSW Stage 1 English outcomes by a long shot. Yet, Steiner's alternative content and pedagogy is approved by all states. So, I think home educators can be afforded the same scope for their choices regarding content and learning approaches, provided they strive to meet outcomes and can demonstrate progress is made.

As home educators, we have the opportunity to incorporate life experiences and interests into learning which makes it relevant to our child. For example, our daughter is interested in astronomy so we have incorporated this into the curriculum; recently we saw dolphins playing in the ocean –my 6 year old daughter asked if we could research dolphins and write a book about them. So we did – she designed her questions for research, we used various sources for research and discussed the importance of being discerning with sources of information; designed a format for her dolphin book and wrote it. This is the type of dynamic, spontaneous, unplanned learning that is embraced, possible and valued by home educators – it meets the needs and interests of the child while also achieving many syllabus outcomes too!

- iv) Potential benefits or impediments to children's safety, welfare and wellbeing

One of the major reasons we home educate is that we know our child is better protected from bullying, neglect, violence and anti-social values by not being at school. This is because she is under the loving care and supervision of her greatest allies – her family. No state appointed guardian will ever provide the love, commitment, standards and supervision that we deliver. The culture and structure of schools is such that they foster anti-social behaviour. The fact is too many kids and families are constantly let down by the state with regard to welfare and safety. Teachers have a lot on their plate looking after so many kids – of course bullying and abuse have ample opportunity to occur within a social setting in which peers look to one another for guidance rather than to loving adults. The fact is many home educators have chosen this path to protect their kids from the abuse and anti-social behaviours that they have experienced or perceive to exist within schools. There is a justifiable lack of confidence in the system being able to provide good standards of care that parents and all children have the right to expect.

The goal of home education is to immerse children within society so that they can learn from being involved in the world. My child is seen by people in the community everyday – she has interaction with many teachers for music, ballet, swimming, French, drama, learning co-ops, grandparents, friends and an AP from the oBOS who comes into our home.... She is under the “watchful eye” of many.

- iv) Inappropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved



I was fortunate to have a very positive experience of registration. I think both the oBOS and parents share a responsibility to ensure kids are being educated and documentation is one way to demonstrate this. Provided parents can demonstrate outcomes are being achieved and progress is happening, I think the oBOS should accept the diverse approaches employed by families to achieve this. There should be freedom regarding selection of content, methods used, philosophies embraced provided progress is made and general outcomes are achieved – similar to the way Steiner schools are allowed to operate.

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

When I was writing programs for my daughter, I was unable to access the 'Program Builder' on the oBOS website designed to assist teachers to program. Perhaps, it is assumed home educators aren't professional in their planning and so don't need access to such tools? Yet, I am expected to present plans upon registration. As a consequence program writing took much longer. It would be a sign of genuine willingness to support if access to such tools was made available to parent educators.

Despite the fact that we have paid through our taxes for resources that exist in the system, in NSW home educators are denied access to things such as TVET courses, Open High School, Belgenny Farm, part-time enrolment in school, programs to support disabilities, access to Centrelink benefits and travel concessions to name a few. We are not able to register our children until they turn 6 which is not the same treatment as that afforded those who enroll for public or private schools. My daughter had completed Kindergarten and part of year 1 prior to when we were able to apply for registration. So, the oBOS expected that she begin Kindergarten work which she had already completed – and we were able to demonstrate this to our AP who acknowledged our daughter was more at grade 2/3 level. We needed to be able to register when our daughter turned 5 not 6 – just like her school friends could.

In other states, such as Victoria, home educators are able to access school resources and courses at the discretion of principals. Some, home educators would enrol in part-time school to utilise resources, however must move from NSW to Victoria if they want to make this a reality. Why is it possible for Victorians?

It is also really unjust that home educated students are deprived access to a HSC mark. This seems to be due to the argument that they cannot complete all necessary school based assessments/course requirements. As a former teacher, who taught HSC history, I believe it would only take a willingness to support

home educated kids in order to change this situation. Kids could enrol and sit tests/assessments at the school, collect and complete necessary assessments or be enrolled part-time. Make the HSC possible for these kids. I was able to do these things as a teen enrolled in Distance Education – so why not Home Education?

Distance Education could be made an option for those who choose or are obliged to home educate. This would be a helpful support to many children and parents; it should be available to those who for whatever reason do not attend a school.

Bottom line is that home educators should be afforded the same access to resources as those who have chosen public or private schooling for their children. We've paid for it.

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

It is interesting that almost every other stake holder within the community has representation on the BoSTES – except us. Why not? If we are truly accepted and supported as one of three legal forms of education in NSW why are we excluded from having a voice within the BoSTES given we wish to participate? The BoSTES regulates home education; therefore I feel that it is only fair we, like other stake holders, have an opportunity to represent ourselves and the interests of home education.

In conclusion, I really hope that my contribution offers you some constructive input for the inquiry. I am grateful to live in a country in which such discussion is valued by the majority. Thank you very much for your time and effort.

Yours Sincerely,