

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

Submission to NSW Home Schooling Enquiry 2014

We are parents of three bright and active children whom we believe should be given every opportunity to realise a great future. We made a carefully considered choice to help them achieve this by choosing to home educate them. This choice we made based upon our many years experience working in various employed and self employed vocations involving experience in technical and organisational fields in businesses and associations and including significant voluntary work with children and youth.

After detailed consideration and investigation of educational options before us and careful consideration of our children's particular needs we concluded that those needs would be best met within a home education environment. Since the early stages of our home schooling experience we have keenly and realistically understood the fundamental need for a solid and sound educational foundation in our children's future. Our children will now tell you they would not wish to learn in any other manner.

We have in the past had reason to be concerned about the manner in which home education has been regulated and supervised by the Board of Studies in NSW, but as a result of recent changes we are now compelled to write to you. These changes by the BoS to home schooling registration procedures through the recent publication of the 2013 Information Pack and related guidelines have very greatly changed the landscape for the majority of home schooling families and has generated a very large degree of concern, confusion and mistrust in relation to the Boards actions, motivations and intent. And to such a degree, that some are now considering ways in which they may avoid registration at all.

The basics of home schooling

The 1990 NSW Education Act provides for three legal and legitimate means for the education of children, state schools, private schools and home schooling and it is this third option which many parents are increasingly choosing for the education of their children. Stated reasons for this choice range through concern over bullying, difficulty of learning for reasons of slowness through to giftedness, behavioral difficulties and a multitude of reasons which may be broadly described as having fallen through the cracks of the school system.

For the most part a home schooling approach is not compatible with either of the other options. It is much more concerned with and adaptable to each individual child's particular needs. It is not compatible with any method of teaching subject by level and/or age grouping and indeed requires that the learning process be entirely dependent upon essentially unregulated curiosity channeled into guided research and a learnt conclusion. Indeed, this most often inspires a greater desire to learn further within that and other related topics. And as well, in the course of investigation and study of one topic several different and diverse subjects are naturally covered.

It follows therefore that the same rules and guidelines as applied to the institutionalised school system cannot and should not be applied to home schooling. It also follows that the supervisory structure and personnel used to oversee home schooling should not be the same as that used to oversee the institutionalised school system. Home schooling can only be properly supervised at a governmental level by personnel trained in and with a clear understanding of home schooling methodology.

Generally speaking, home schooling is most often a family based choice. Within a family it will likely involve learning together as a group, a range of children's ages, needs, interests, abilities and motivations etc. and will often also involve a range of learning difficulties, special needs, attention deficit syndrome and related conditions as well as various degrees of giftedness. The families who make the choice to home school cannot and do not follow the “traditional” concept for example of a strict timetable of study times and specific lessons within specific age groupings. Rather, learning is most often approached by a process of assessing the child's needs and interests and exploring appropriate means and resources for research and exploration, then a parent in the broad role of teacher guides the child towards discovery and application. And in a twist surprising to many, this is very often all achieved in less time than a child would normally spend at school and learning also becomes something of a daily life style not limited to 9 am to 3 pm and only on weekdays.

The vast majority of home schooling parents acknowledge the need for their children to be appropriately educated. They are best placed to be able to assess the needs, seek appropriate resources and develop the path to meet those needs for their children. Experienced home educating parents know that a teaching degree is not required to inspire a child to investigate, research and learn. For the most part all the parent needs to do is to further build upon their own knowledge and experience and to guide the natural curiosity of their child. Parents are not funded, supported and resourced by a large organisation as are school teachers, but they are able to do a very good job of teaching their own children. Many many examples from recent and past history show this.

Difficulties regarding publication of BoS 2013 Information Pack

The NSW Education Act 1990 places the responsibility with parents for the education of their children, with the State being charged with the duty to ensure the quality of that education. This is the case whether that education is in a structured school or by home schooling. It follows therefore that whatever body a government may appoint to supervise the education of children, it should be guided only by these principles. It should not in any way be dictating the manner, means and method of delivery of that education. It will need of course to assess education quality, but it should not be putting forward a specific or particular method or ideology by which any such assessment is to be measured. This is increasingly not what the Board of Studies has been doing for a number of years, particularly in regards to home schooling and now seems to be openly declaring its hand in. In so doing it has over stepped its appropriate and proper role and responsibilities.

We are very greatly concerned at the nature of the changes recently published by BoS, the manner in which these changes have been introduced without consultation with the home schooling community and the inflexible authoritarian tone in which these changes are being presented. In answer to any reasonable objection BoS steadfastly refuses to withdraw the Information Pack to allow for meaningful consultation with home schooling families and associations or to significantly modify it in any way. Rather, it continually counters objections with such as a PR exercise by the providing of placating responses, supposed justifications why procedures embarked upon cannot be interfered with and the provision on its web site of a series of Q&As supposed to be used to interpret the new Information Pack and BoS policy.

The tone and manner of the changes in the 2013 Information Pack read as only allowing for a home version of the public school system. An approach which the vast majority of home schooling families do not follow and for very good reasons. Further, from the manner in which the Information Pack is worded and presented and the manner of responses of the BoS and its Authorised Persons it would appear they are more concerned with focusing on burdensome procedures and excessive regulation in regard to the manner and type of education they think parents should be using in a home education environment.

Changes associated with the 2013 Information Pack include,

- Removal of recognition of different styles of home education
- Addition of a requirement for home educators to provide a written plan for recording, teaching and assessing linked to the outcomes of the NSW Syllabus
- Removal of registration via documentation
- Addition of a requirement to only teach to the years for which children are registered
- Change in the process so that initial registrations be a maximum 1 year and no minimum registration
- Addition of an allowance for “spot checks” of home educators
- Addition of a requirement that all home education occur in the home and be taught by the parent
- An overall reduction in flexibility
- Change in attitude by APs towards home educators
- Making registration for home education stressful and difficult

Such changes make the level of paperwork and regulations etc. required to be followed excessive, complicated and onerous. Which in itself immediately changes the flexibility, manner and atmosphere of home schooling previously practiced by the majority of families. Home schooling parents and their families should not be subjected to extra burdens such as these, rather they should be supported and encouraged.

We are greatly concerned with the way in which the new Information Pack has been introduced. We are aware of families who have, in 18 months or so prior to about Sept. 2013 in the course of registering or reregistering for home schooling, had many of the requirements contained within the new Information Pack applied to their applications. This in spite of assurances by BoS that the 2011 Information Pack was still current and even after enquiries by The Home Education Association and others as to why these requirements were being applied enquirers were told that nothing had changed. It is now obvious that the requirements contained within the new Information Pack were even then being actively applied unreasonably and inappropriately long before its publication.

We are also aware there has been no consultation with any home schooling persons or groups of interest prior to the publication and introduction of the new Information Pack. Despite BoS attempting to make it seem otherwise. Equally so, BoS steadfastly refuses to withdraw the 2013 Information Pack to allow for consultation with recognised home schooling associations and interest groups. The 2013 Information Pack as it stands reads like a document to advocate for the implementation and supervision by BoS of a “school in the home” approach and does not in any way discuss or provide for a manner of education such as unregulated curiosity channeled into guided research and a learnt conclusion. It is apparent the BoS does not understand or sympathise with this type of approach in home schooling and this situation is therefore insupportable and totally inappropriate. This being the case, supervision of home schooling should be placed in the hands of those who do understand the needs and manner of operation of home schooling as such.

No appropriate evidence is being put forward to support the need for such changes and in the wording used in the 2013 Information Park, nor reason given for the change of attitude by officers and APs of the BoS to home schooling applicants, as well as the much closer ongoing supervision of families. With the result of

making parents feel like they cannot be trusted with the education of their own children. A parent could also be easily made to feel that they were guilty of neglect of their children, if they were not being educated in the same strict regimented manner inherent in the school system.

The major reason being put forward for the implementation of the 2013 Information Pack and refusal of BoS to withdraw it to allow for consultation seems to revolve around BoS supposed desire to prepare home schooling families for the introduction of a new syllabus, as shown by this newspaper statement. *"The board is aware that home-schooling families need to be informed about the new syllabuses so that there is time for familiarisation and planning prior to 2014"*.

It can be shown from a study of past Information Packs and the wording of the Education Act that it is not required of BoS to enforce any syllabus as a minimum requirement. Indeed, it would appear there is a deliberate intent to change the definition of "quality of education" to that of a "minimum standard". But, if this is indeed the general crux of the boards concern, it becomes very difficult to understand why the board is not prepared to withdraw the 2013 Information Pack and make every effort to allow for immediate consultation with interested parties. Surely a much easier way in which to arrive at any such objective.

Conscientious Objection

The 1990 Education Act provides for potential home schooling applicants to conscientiously object to being registered by BoS. Although BoS has in some manner acknowledged this provision in the act, it has never seemed to treat this as a serious option. It is offered, but with the clearly stated condition that an applicant would still need to meet all the criteria applied to a normal applicant and be approved in the same manner.

Historically, to establish grounds for conscientious objection, firstly inherent convictions, motives and beliefs must be considered. Once bona fides are established an objector will either be completely exempted or required to participate in some non direct or secondary manner. A genuine conscientious objector by any reasonable definition should never be compelled to participate in the same task or ideology to which that person is objecting.

In regard to home schooling, a potential applicant who, upon viewing the conditions and requirements of the BoS contained in the 2013 Information Pack in regards to such as teaching a particular syllabus and associated reporting and record keeping etc., objects to educating their children in such a manner should be at liberty under the terms of the Act to conscientiously object.

In this case the only requirement which should be placed upon the education of the children concerned should be that of the Act itself, which states that it is the responsibility of the parent to educate their child and the responsibility of the state is to ensure the quality of that education. In other words, a parent should be free to choose to use a different model of education to that which the BoS or others may prefer. Further, for this arrangement to be able to continue it need only be shown that the child/children concerned are receiving a reasonable standard of education, and this should not be used to imply that a knowledge test should be used or measuring tool established and applied to be able to define any level of attainment of education.

Conclusions

We therefore urge action in the protection of the rights of home schoolers under the NSW Education Act 1990 and the injection of a large degree of common sense into the currently unfair and oppressive process instigated by the Board of Studies in NSW.

We ask that at minimum these changes be instituted,

- the 2013 Information Pack be immediately withdrawn,
- home schooling guidelines and policy revert to the 2011 Information Pack,
- meaningful discussion and consultation may be held with all home schooling individuals, representative associations and groups,
- towards the adoption of fairer guidelines for home schoolers recognising and providing for the unique nature and varied styles of home schooling compared to the institutionalised school system.

We do however urge the implementation of far more reaching changes,

- the approval and administration of home schooling applications and registrations be handled by a body independent of the NSW Board of Studies,
- administrative personnel and APs dealing with home school families and students be trained to better understand and support home schoolers and home schooling methods,
- that far better direct support be made available and provided for home school students right through to year 12 in all areas such as Centrelink support and payments, access to additional training programs and resources available to public and private school students and any additional support and concessions available to public and private school students such as travel concessions.

We further urge that,

- a better and fairer process be implemented to cater for conscientious objection within any home schooling guidelines, that those who wish to be conscientious objectors may do so without needing to go through the registration process due to the Principles on which the 1990 Act is based Part 2, 4 (b) “ the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child’s parents.” .

Thank you for your attention and assistance in these matters.