

**Submission  
No 224**

## **INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING**

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Select Committee on Home Schooling  
Parliament House  
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#### LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

After the hearing in parliament some days ago the Hon. Paul Green MLC said the submission process would remain open until September 5 so I lodge here my submission, with my appreciation for your time.

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

(a) the background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand,

I am aware that there are other jurisdictions in Australia that are more supportive of home schooling than NSW, with New Zealand even paying parents a nominal education payment. I would suggest, from my extensive medical and public health work around the world, that the best outcomes are achieved through aspirational regulation combined with support. In other words I urge NSW to emulate or improve on the practices of jurisdictions strongly supportive of home schooling. Punitive, overly restrictive systems are highly inefficient and result in lower compliance.

(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,

My three children are primary age, however they already look forward to contributing positively to society using their skills and interests. They have good role models in this: their two cousins are home schooled and have already begun further study and part time work outside of their home education. Those two young men already contribute greatly to their community. Through our several home school networks we have watched many young adults transitioning from home education to further study and work. Many of them start early because they have finished the school curriculum and are looking to extend their knowledge in areas of interest so take Open Learning subjects or a Certificate III level course at TAFE before stepping on to university.

I have seen a lot of teenagers struggling with their final years of high school and that transition period, but so far not one of those has been home schooled. I readily admit this is only my experience, but I am convinced that transitioning to the adult world is significantly easier for children who have spent their schooling years already interacting with the adult world as is usually the case with home schooled children.

(ii) financial costs,

I would point out here that we remove the cost of educating our children from the tax payer and take that upon ourselves, while at the same time severely limiting our collective earning potential when we home educate our

children. Home education is highly cost-effective for society and, in terms of positive outcomes, highly efficient. It is, however, seriously neglected in terms of support.

My recommendation to the inquiry is that home schooling families be supported to do their job to the best of their ability, with financial support and greater access to other services, including ways to integrate more seamlessly with non home schooled children. My children go to school at the moment, but as my wife identifies herself as a home schooling mother she continues to provide extra support. Our school has benefited from her experience and enthusiasm as she teaches choir three hours a week, changes readers, works in the canteen, is secretary of the P&C and helps out in any other way she can.

Supporting home schoolers both financially and in terms of access to other services, including local schools, means parents who work full time as home educators are reducing the unemployment rate while contributing not only to the development of rounded, intelligent and positively contributing members of society but also to their broader community and their local schools.

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

I am a doctor and public health consultant and my wife trained as a teacher, worked as an Australian diplomat and is now an author. I am of Sri Lankan descent and she harks back to Britain. We are both in the 35-45 age bracket and both have Master degrees, I also have a PhD.

Our motivation to home school our children began when our oldest was in pre-school and we noticed a significant change in her behaviour. She became withdrawn and started saying things like "I'm no good at writing". We decided our daughter was too young to learn she was not good enough and pulled her out of preschool, intending to start her at the compulsory age of six. In the intervening years we learned as much as we could about educating our children at home, determined that our daughter should not start school disadvantaged. During that time we discovered not only did we all enjoy the process but our daughter thrived. By academic measures she pulled ahead of her peer group and socially she returned to her extroverted, curious self. Despite both being staunch supporters of the public school system we decided home schooling would become a staple part of the education of our children.

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

For much of the time that we home schooled our children were unregistered as such. We felt the registration system was absurdly burdensome. Schools have suffered under the weight of increasing paperwork for the past two decades or more and this has meant more administrative staff, more casual teacher days to give classroom teachers time to do their administration and endless reams of box-ticking and form-filling. What it has NOT meant is better educational outcomes.

Parents have neither administrators nor casual staff and they have no budget to hire such. They choose to home educate so that they can focus on providing the very best individually tailored education to their children. To force parents to spend their valuable time on an activity that has already proven ineffective at meeting the goals of better care or education for children is a very poor return on investment indeed.

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

Home schooling is a necessary option for many children. The simple truth is that mainstream schooling does not suit every child. Our oldest child was so active, and her learning style was so kinetic that she found the nature of school shut down her brain. Now, at the age of eight, she is able to sit still long enough to engage well at school and is still ahead of her peers but had we kept her in school from the age of four she would have already learned that she was no good at school, no good at learning, no good at sitting still and doing as she was told. For her, four was too young to engage positively with the Australian schooling system (she had already been to preschool in both New York and Sri Lanka and done very well - both of those schools had a highly physical curriculum).

However all three of our children are competent, highly functioning children who fit in well at school and in home schooling groups. None of them have a disability of any kind and will do perfectly well at school or at home. Home schooling is not just an option for those whose children are 'outcast' from school but for any child whose carer is willing and able to invest the time and effort.

As a teacher, my wife is keenly aware of the age standards and so keeps an eye on their progress. None of our children are uniquely gifted, but all three pull significantly ahead of their peer groups when working at home thanks to the individual focused attention. When they go back to school their academic achievement slows down again. This says to me that the educational needs of any child can be well served at home, providing the carer has enthusiastically chosen such an intensive course of action.

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

Home schooling, to me, simply means that a child works in partnership with their main carer to achieve an education that will develop them into a competent, positive, contributing adult. It is essential to allow flexibility as to where this education can place so that the child can take advantage of available educational opportunities (as schools are able to).

Research has shown clearly that individual learning programs work best for children and many schools have taken this approach. Home schooling is simply able to cater more closely to individual needs. Distance education moves back toward a one-size fits all approach, with less scope for tailoring and school education also struggles on this score simply because one teacher has limited time to interact with each and every child individually.

But the basic premise is the same, since educational research is clear on the way a human brain learns. Partnering with a child in their education rather than lifting the lid and pouring the information in is far more effective and the best teachers, at school or at home, are well aware of this. Schools, teachers and parents should all be supported to partner with children in the design of an individual, appropriate learning program for the best possible results.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling including:

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

I strongly recommend that the registration process be made simple, aspirational and supportive as a way to improve educational and welfare outcomes and decrease the number of unregistered home schoolers. The current process is already burdensome and seems to have been made more restrictive with the APs interpreting the regulations in their own subjective ways, often to the point of making life very difficult for home schooling families.

If we all want the same thing: the best education and welfare outcomes for our children, then the best way to achieve this is to support parents in whatever education decisions they make. The experience of other jurisdictions shows that neglectful or abusive parents do not suddenly choose to home school in far greater numbers simply because the registration process becomes simpler. So simplifying the process and providing support rather than inspection is a win-win option.

Importantly, home schoolers should be represented in significant numbers in the policy process to achieve outcomes that will work in the real world.

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

Authorised Persons will necessarily approach the regulations subjectively as all humans do. If they feel that their mandate is to catch people out, home school families will do their best to avoid the APs, many remaining unregistered and others ticking the boxes and then hoping never to see them again. If the APs are trained to provide support and assistance to the families they cover, families are more likely to reach out to the APs, stay connected with the system, access support, provide a better education for their children by drawing on the experience of the

APs and others, and share freely with the APs so that the APs can in turn provide greater support to the families in their area.

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

The syllabus provides an invaluable guide to parents to understand what experts deem necessary for a child to learn, and what is appropriate to their age and stage. Strict adherence to the syllabus runs counter to educational research that shows the best outcomes result from individually tailored educational programs that are relevant to a child and that a child is motivated to engage with. For most children this means following a line of inquiry for quite some time, then shifting focus to another line. They may well stray far from the syllabus but over the course of their schooling years cover at least as much as the average mainstream schooled child. Particularly in the early years it will be difficult to judge at any one point in time how successfully a child is covering the syllabus, and this is where the aspirational aspect of policy should come in.

Parents should aspire to cover the syllabus by the end of the schooling period with the APs supporting them to do so, however strict adherence to the syllabus will be counterproductive and, once again, you will lose a lot of people off the radar as they refuse to register.

Keep in mind the end goal of education and remember that whether a child learns about obtuse angles in year two or year eleven (or at all, if their chosen career requires no knowledge of obtuse angles), will have no bearing on that child, their future, their community or the country and keep the syllabus an aspirational goal.

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

Education is the development of a child's facilities such that they can function in an adult world. Child welfare is upholding the right of a child to a safe, secure childhood free of coercion and fear.

If the two are conflated and child welfare made the top-billing concern it deserves to be then we should be pouring billions of dollars more into supporting families who are struggling, many of whom are already on the radar of the child welfare authorities in each state, but are left without support because those authorities are overwhelmed.

If the two are conflated, and perhaps they should be, then school must come under equal scrutiny, where many children feel coerced and fearful five days a week for up to 13 years in a row.

I am a staunch advocate of the rights of every child, much of my public health work all over the world has been in service of children and I say this: if the Board of Studies claims to be about education then let it be about education and leave welfare to the experts. If it wants to move into child welfare then provide vastly more funding and training so that it can do that job too, and do it properly.

The truth of home schooling is the same as the truth for the vast majority of parents: home schooling parents want the best for their children and go out of their way to provide that. Many a child comes to school from an abusive home and abuse happens in every corner of society. There is no quick fix to that, only social change through education and support.

If home schooling regulations wish to move into the area of child welfare then once again the key word is support. Through support you are more likely to have parents register, so you have the opportunity to connect with them. You are then more likely to spot issues and are in a position to provide the support to help struggling families or, if that proves unsuccessful, instigate child protection measures.

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

Appropriate regulation must keep in mind the goal of education and the goal of society. If we want healthy, safe and happy children developing into competent, positive, contributing adults then we know from education and psychology research that the best way is to partner with children themselves to provide an individually appropriate, tailored learning environment and program and for them to have as close to possible one-on-one mentorship.

No research, anywhere, suggests that increasing the administrative burden and providing punitive measures for non-compliance improves outcomes.

So an appropriate regulatory regime would be one that encourages and supports the goal of education as above, without imposing unnecessary burdens of administration, proof or fear of punishment. The current regime does not meet that standard and should be simplified and made more supportive of the end goal.

If the goal of the home schooling regulation is something other than optimum education, for example monitoring the numbers of children home schooling or testing to see how they are tracking in academic terms then these goals should be made explicit.

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

Once again if home schooling regulation is about improving educational outcomes then support is key. One of the concerns many people have about home schooling is socialisation of the children. Most home schooling families go to great lengths to provide a variety of opportunities to socialise so that home schooled children are often more confident, particularly in the adult world, than their peers, more able to self-regulate and better able to predict consequences of their actions. These are the fundamental features of emotional intelligence and serve them well in the future.

However for truly optimal educational outcomes, home schoolers and mainstream schoolers should have more opportunity to interact and learn from each other. I suggest providing support along the lines of what is available to students in government and private schools such as access to TVET courses, Open High School, school sports and swim programs, school arts and music programs, Hospital School programs and support programs for students with a disability. In some states home educated students are able to be part-time enrolled in school in order to access particular subjects, support or programs.

If you are thinking: but why should they get that for free? It is hardly for free. I am sure home schooling families would not mind paying the nominal public school yearly fee, particularly if they were provided with an educational support supplement along the lines of the financial support that comes to educational institutions with every other Australian child. Equally they could work out an appropriate figure with private schools to cover involvement in such activities.

There is some social stigma in some areas, which would make it very difficult to access support. Our local school is a model of how things could be, with the principal and teachers interested in taking every opportunity to provide the best education for their students. They know that this includes embracing new experiences and taking advantage of unique situations.

Home schooled families can contribute greatly to their local schools and communities and a great many would gladly engage in such mutually beneficial exchanges. In some schools we have arranged for teachers to provide after hours chemistry classes (among others) for home schooled high school students. We pay for the teachers' time, and the teachers that I have spoken to say it is the highlight of their week to teach their subject to students who have chosen to attend and are genuinely excited to learn.

With an open mind and a truly supportive attitude, we can create a unique, flexible and highly adaptive education system in this country, and home schooling will be one strong foundation of that system.

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

There are 23 members on the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards. They include teachers, principals, nominees of the Catholic Education Commission and the Association of Independent Schools, an expert in early childhood education, an Aboriginal person and various others. There is no member representing home educators on the Board, even though BoSTES is responsible for the regulation of home education in NSW. BoSTES should be required to have at least one member that represents the home education community.

Thank you

Dr Buddhi Lokuge