

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Name suppressed

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Partially Confidential

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

I am a home educating parent, who currently educates three children aged 15, 13 and 9. Our youngest child, aged 5, goes the local state Primary School, which she enjoys. We support her decision to attend although over the years I have come to believe that home education would offer a better education for any child, in almost any situation. We have been home educating for five years. We chose to home educate when it became apparent that school was not going to provide a viable means of educating these children. It wasn't an easy decision. It took us two years to reach the decision. At that stage my relationship with my children was strained. Their behaviour was not pleasant. I had a six month old baby. I doubted my own ability to provide a comprehensive education and maintain my patience. A home educating relative suggested that their behaviour was likely to improve, due to home education, as would our relationship. She was right.

Although, the school made no objection, admitting that they "knew nothing about home education", they were not supportive of our decision either, fearing "social isolation". We also faced some unnecessary unpleasantness from our "friends", who also knew nothing about home education. Over the years, they have changed their minds as they have been told about what we were faced with at the time; have seen how our children have flourished and through us been able to learn a bit about home education. If there was one thing that I would hope would change as a result of this enquiry, it would be that the population as a whole would gain a more positive view of home education and that schools, in particular, would help parents transition to this mode of education where appropriate.

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,

We know there are benefits and draw backs of any education system but believe that each system should strive to be "the best" it can be. In an ideal world, homeschooling in NSW would take the best of practices from all neighboring states. In Victoria, ACT and the Northern Territories children can attend school part time. It would be wonderful if this was an option. Despite, Home education being a legal form of education in NSW, access to TVET courses is denied because our children are not registered, and cannot be registered, with a school.

In Tasmania a working party of home educators offers recommendations to an Advisory Council. This provides a more friendly approach and would be less resented than a government body imposing their structures. I personally know home educators who refuse to register due to the top down system operated in NSW. In Tasmania home educators also have access to a government funded resource center. In NSW we are expected to fund all our own resources. While there is significant co-operation and borrowing that occurs between established home-educators on the Central Coast, those who are new to home educating can find it a challenging and expensive experience as they try out different methods until they find resources that suit their children's individual needs. Our local library offers a fantastic range of learn to read resources and the staff happily put together resources to support our term programs, but access to

computer programs which support those with learning difficulties, such as “Easy Read”, which is used at our local primary school would be hugely valuable.

In Queensland provisional registration is given for six months when a child is withdrawn from school, allowing for families to ensure their child’s well being and allowing sufficient time to commence home education, to make contact with other home educators and get properly organized.

In New Zealand, Home Educators are paid a rebate for education similar to the rebate offered to privately educated students. This would certainly enable us to offer a greater range of opportunities to our children and would encourage everyone who home educates to register.

(b) the current context of home schooling in New South Wales:

The current process offers a top down approach, which is directed more by processes than by care for children. In my experience, APs have numerous boxes to tick. Despite an AP witnessing and engaging with children who have obviously been learning and are physically and mentally thriving, a registration can hang in the balance over a lack of timetable. So, from our experience APs seem to have a limited understanding of how the more liberal forms of home education, such as natural learning, work. The demand for a timetable is in conflict with the way such education is conducted. APs admit that no one will check that we adhere to the time table drawn up so the exercise also seems rather pointless.

The education act states that parents have the main responsibility for their children’s education. When we take our children out of school we are not abdicating responsibility, but rather taking it back. It should be assumed that we care and love our children, rather than presuming we are suspect and may abuse our children.

When we withdrew our son from school he was eight. He had been bullied by both children and teachers. Initially the school had refused to believe this was possible. After I had personally witnessed and identified one of the boys, and explained the extent of my son’s distress, which included nightmares, bed wetting, hitting his siblings and suicidal thoughts, he was given access to the school psychologist. The school admitted the “bullies” he identified were known problem children. We were also experiencing problems with his teachers. The teacher he had in year two was, after complaints, required to operate an open door policy and have other teachers check on her. After she left school he told me that she had on several occasions made an example of him in class and torn his work up. The following year he had a teacher who has a reputation for disliking active boys. During a meeting with her, when we suggested that he might be “bored”, she replied that he needed to learn to manage his boredom, or how would he going to be able to hold down a job. I aspire to greater levels of education for my child than thirteen years of “learning to manage boredom” and I hope that he will choose a career which interests and excites him. Within months of home educating the nightmares and bed wetting stopped. Gradually, he became a happy and confident child again. He still hates committing anything to paper but does love researching information and in the home environment this in-balance does not hinder his progress.

In contrast, our daughter had done well in school. She enjoyed the experience and mainly had great teachers. The only thing she was ever criticized for was her lack of confidence. We had had an on-going “fight” about her English because there was a huge discrepancy between her reading and comprehension levels and her ability to write. However, by year five she was in the top reading group of the school, i.e. the top year six group. She chose to home-educate because she liked the idea and didn’t want to left out of potentially fun activities. Since home educating she discovered self-confidence and continues to excel

academically. She is officially in year 10, studying a combination of year 9, 10, 11, 12 and university entrance level subjects.

Our second son simply refused to go to school. He may well have picked up the stress surrounding his brother's attendance. For the first years of his home education he refused to be taught by any other adult other than myself or his father. He gradually gained social maturity and has attended swimming classes, gym classes, sleepovers and attends Cub Scouts where he has been on overnight camps. Despite being severely dyslexic we are able to cover work quickly because 90% of the teaching and learning is conducted verbally. Due to one on one teaching, there isn't the need to write as extensively as in school and consequently he isn't as "handicapped" as he would appear in that environment. He also requires constant movement which would not be seen as appropriate in a class room. At home he plays happily with his Lego while we do oral comprehension and lessons that require him to be still can be kept short.

The cost of home educating is hard to calculate. In choosing to home educate three children, I have given up the possibility of a career. I have a degree in English, honors in Anthropology and a PhD. It is possible to home educate very cheaply and this is particularly true when there is a large and active network of home educators. In fact part of our choice to home educate was because we perceived it to be cheaper than private school. However, it is also true that we could provide a better education for our children if we had greater financial resources. It would be highly advantageous if we received a rebate similar to families in New Zealand, or the equivalent amount given by the government to students in private education.

There is a huge diversity in the styles of home education and the education philosophies followed. Within my own home there have been periods in which I have taught through unit studies, natural learning, or been text book centered. I also vary styles between children. Consequently, it is not always possible to adhere to the NSW Curriculum and meet all the stage outcomes. Personally, I do not see this as a problem. I have witnessed how despite apparent neglect to teach a subject, children will learn about it. I have also learnt that despite endless teaching a child may fail to remember or "get" a concept. While, APs may be aware of some home education philosophies we have to fit our reporting to the school model, which is not always easy to achieve.

Unequivocally, the most important aspect of our home educating experience has been our ability to learn in the wider community, to visit museums, galleries, other home educators and places of interest, to go on bush walks, take swimming lessons at the local pool, do music lessons and to do volunteer work. Home education draws on all the resources it can to satisfy the developing interest of a child and should not be restricted to home grounds. For children who learn through doing, as at least one of mine do, it would be madness to restrict their education to the home. Restricting home education to the "home" may also place children at risk. Many home educators are wise enough to know that if they are having a bad day, for whatever reason, the solution is to go out. The problem is that we are apparently expected (by the BoS and the wider community) to be at home during school hours.

(c) regulatory framework for home schooling:

Many of my home educating friends remain unregistered because they find the prospect of registration too daunting and are afraid of being in trouble for have had an extended period of lapsed registration. This month I have helped a family transition their child to home education and guided them through the registration process. This took approximately three full days. They have said they would have felt unable to do by themselves as they did not know where to begin. Ideally, parents in such a position would be given a provisional six month registration. Perhaps during this time they could be paired with an established home educator who would introduce them to alternative possibilities for home education and guide them

through the registration and documentation processes. An “amnesty” period may be required to encourage those who are currently unregistered to come forward.

I believe that home education offers a safer, kinder and healthier environment than school. In our experience there are lower frequencies of exclusion. As home education has a high proportion of children with special needs, younger home educated children learn to understand and tolerate each other with close parental supervision. There are very low levels of bullying. Where children do not get on, they do not have to “put up” with each other day in and day out. Often after a break from each other they get along tolerably well. My children have suffered from lower levels of anxiety whilst being home educated and exhibited fewer negative behaviors as a result. Our children are comfortable visiting home-educated friends independently because they know the whole family prior to a visit. This is in contrast to the situation at school, in which families may barely know each other. Consequently, children are less likely to be left in situations where they may find themselves out of their depth. The community, as a whole, has a high expectation of manners, morals and behavior. We have also found that our children are able to be more active and to maintain healthier diets and sleeping patterns than when they attended school.

My children are often identified as being home educated in the wider community, not because of their educational problems, but because of their competence. Our children socialize, not only with their year peers, but with children and adults of all ages. My daughter’s youngest personal friend is 12 and her oldest is in her 70s. Adults are often surprised at their willingness to talk, their depth of knowledge and their interest in learning. On more than one occasion we have been told, “You don’t find that in a school child”.

Regards,