

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

Name: Ms Samantha Nimmo

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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL HOME SCHOOLING INQUIRY

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Summary

My husband and I are both educated to post-graduate level. We started to home school our eldest son because of negative experiences at school, particularly bullying. We continue to home school him, and his two brothers, due to the positive experiences of home schooling. Home schooling offers us flexibility, and opportunities for many outings and other enrichment activities.

My children's welfare and wellbeing have improved hugely since removing them from school.

We spend between \$430 and \$970 per child per term, which is less than we had to pay as Temporary Residents towards education in a public school in NSW.

Our experiences with the regulatory process have been largely positive. Nevertheless, I feel that it could be improved by using different selection criteria for authorised persons, and by allowing a wider interpretation of the NSW syllabus.

If BOSTES is to remain the regulatory body for home schoolers in NSW, the Board makeup should reflect this, and there should be more transparency about the criteria for allowing registration, with means of appeal if short periods of registration are given.

Here are my more detailed comments on the following terms of reference:

1.(b) The current context of home schooling in New South Wales including

1.(b)(ii) financial costs

When we moved to NSW we were temporary residents and had to pay \$4500 per child, to register our children in a public school. After I started to home school my eldest son, I kept notes on how much I was spending on his education. The table below refers to the years 2012 to 2014. I can provide the source Excel file if it is of interest.

	Minimum spent p.a./\$	Maximum spent p.a./\$
Events and classes	360	1600
Childcare	450	6000
Equipment, e.g. maths manipulatives and laminator	0	580
Books and other reusable resources	420	800
Subscriptions, e.g. to online providers such as Studyladder and Mathletics, or to home schooling organisations	480	1540
Consumables (mostly art materials and stationery)	15	170
Cost per child per term over the past 3 years*	430	970

*It is only in the past year that I have been home schooling all three of my sons, therefore the totals in each category do not relate directly to these averages.

Comparison with costs if my children were at school: I have never spent as much as I was paying for public school as a temporary resident. The costs incurred by a home schooling family can be large, especially if you include courses and excursions and paying for childcare. However, even while at public school parents are expected to buy their child's stationery

and workbooks, contribute towards specialist classes (e.g. dance and gymnastics) and towards excursions. This way I get to customise my children's education, and to choose which resources and activities I want to spend my money on (while still covering all of the NSW syllabus).

Childcare: In the cost of childcare I have only included the childcare costs directly incurred due to home schooling activities. Pre-school attendance, or family daycare for my toddler are not included. When only one of my sons was home schooling, I paid for after-school care for my other school aged son every time we went to an event and could not get back for school collection time. However, the largest childcare cost was incurred during one year when I had a nanny for 6 hours a day every week during term time. This was to allow myself a break from being in charge of the children all the time including weekends.

Loss of earnings: It is unlikely that I would be working full-time until my youngest child were in pre-school, and it is always a difficulty for parents to get truly flexible employment that takes into account school hours and their primary duty of caring for their own family. However, once my youngest child reaches this age, there will be a significant loss to our family of the earnings that I could be gaining if in paid employment.

Benefit to the state: By home schooling my own children rather than sending them to school, the state is possibly losing out on tax from my wages, the wages of childcare workers and a small proportion of tax from the teachers and other school employees that would otherwise be involved in the education of my children. However, the state is not having to pay the minimum 'per head' payment that it makes towards all children in school, whether state, Catholic or private. I believe that overall this leads to a huge financial benefit to the state for all children who are home schooled rather than attending school for their education between the ages of 6 and 17 years.

Lack of state financial support for home schoolers: I believe that in the USA there are some states where home schoolers receive the same amount of money as schools would receive to educate each children. I am jealous of this situation and I certainly would appreciate some financial support with home schooling. However I am prepared to bear the financial cost since, for my children, I believe the outcomes of home schooling are far more positive than it would be to send them back into school.

1.(b)(iii) demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children

My husband and I are both educated to postgraduate level. I have a MA from Cambridge University in Natural Sciences and an MPhil(Sc) from Birmingham University in Physical Chemistry. He has an MA (CANTAB) and an MEng (CANTAB) and is also a member of several professional organisations.

The reasons we started home schooling are not the same as the reasons we continue to home school our children.

Bullying in school

We started to home school my eldest son because he was having a very difficult time fitting into his Year 4 class in our local public school. He was also being bullied, although it took us a while to realise this. The school had a bullying policy, and we had several meetings with the staff, but while they expressed sympathy for his situation I had no confidence that they were going to do anything to support him and to stop the bullying from continuing. In six months, he had changed from a confident, outgoing, happy child, to a withdrawn, emotional and impulsive one. He did not 'act out' at school but he took out all his anger and misery on his family, particularly on me (his mother) and one of his brothers. The school counsellor implied he was anxious and suggested we took him to a psychologist. We did this for two

terms. This made some difference, but the real change came when we withdrew him from the school situation.

Adults in situations where they are experiencing workplace bullying have various systems they can appeal to, and ultimately they have the choice whether to continue in that place of employment or not. If I were in a job where a colleague was bullying me and my superiors were not addressing the problem, I would not hesitate to leave. There may be some that think children should be made to 'stand up' to bullying situations and that it 'toughens them up' to deal with bullying. I believe that by removing my son from this situation I taught him that he does not have to put up with antisocial behaviour and that he always has power to make changes.

We could have chosen to send our eldest to a different school. However, at that point, my second eldest son was still at our local public school and was very happy. I did not want to juggle taking my children to two different schools and I had also heard that other public schools in the same area had a similar problem with bullying. It made sense to keep my eldest at home for a while.

Low academic standards in school

I believe that in school, my children were not performing as well as they could do, academically. When my eldest son left school, I was worried that he was not pushing himself academically, and I was particularly worried about his performance in mathematics. After 3 years of home schooling he is far more confident in all areas of work than he was when in school, and his level of skill in mathematics has risen to above average (among his age group).

I believe that my son was merely 'coasting' at school. His teachers did not notice that anything was wrong because he did not make trouble, and he was not at the top or the bottom of his class. It is hard for a teacher of 30 children to work with each child to achieve their potential, although some exceptional teachers do a wonderful job.

I am not identifying any of my children as 'gifted'. I have misgivings in any case about selecting children at any particular age and separating them from other children to work on more advanced work. I would prefer to see an educational system that is set up to provide differentiation in every lesson, and responds to children as they need help or stretching.

By 'differentiation' I mean providing varied work for children at different levels but within the same classroom. It is possible to do this, but I realise that this is a very labour-intensive model and to deliver it in schools would require smaller class sizes, extra classroom help or both. It is easier when working with your own children, and working one-on-one, to notice the gaps and the areas that need more attention. I can also provide specialist help in the areas that are not my own strengths.

Teasing for being different

My second eldest son stayed in school while my eldest was being home schooled. He had not been bullied as my eldest son was. After a while I began to worry about him as well. He had always been an enthusiastic, extrovert child and he very easily makes friends. He is extremely keen on science and he often chose to talk about science in his 'news' sessions in class. Sometimes he came home to tell me that his classmates had called him 'weird' for talking about science. I found that after a while he was censoring the topics he wanted to talk about, for fear of the response from his classmates.

The class teacher, while she was very positive about him in our one-to-one interview that year, was not supportive in the classroom. My son said she gave him very little feedback at all when he gave his presentations. I feel that this encouraged the other children to pick on him for being different to the norm.

I have heard of similar experiences from friends whose children have talents in other areas, e.g. singing. Rather than celebrating another child who has particular skills, it seems that jealousy makes some schoolchildren pick on the 'tall flowers'.

Picking on children who stand out is childish behaviour and is likely to stem from low self-esteem. It is not surprising, but it does not have to be encouraged. It is possible for adults to model inclusive behaviour which celebrates differences. This is even written into the PDHPE syllabus. However, I have found the home schooling community far more accepting of differences than the school community in NSW.

Lack of sympathy/outdated teaching methods in school

My second son has hypermobile joints and handwriting hurts his hands. He has had a year of therapy with an Occupational Therapist (OT) and this made a difference, but he still finds it difficult to write by hand. Even when trying hard, his writing is quite messy and he gets tired after writing a few lines. The OT suggested that it would be a good idea for him to learn to type.

His teacher in Year 1 mentioned his handwriting to me and I was able to tell her about this situation. She was very supportive and even suggested the whole class might try the exercises he does to 'warm up' his hands before writing.

His teacher in Year 2 was very unsupportive of anyone with messy writing, or anyone who still reversed certain letters and numbers. Shortly before I started home schooling this son, I discovered that she had been keeping him in at recess and lunchtime, getting him to make him write lines. He said it was a good day when she did not keep him in for some reason. The class teacher had not communicated with me about this at all, otherwise I could have discussed the situation with her.

This punishment was shocking to me. Not only was it completely inappropriate in my son's situation, but using lines as punishment is extremely outdated and is unlikely to achieve anything except a strong dislike of writing. This is not what I want my children to learn.

At home, we still practice handwriting. However, most of our work does not rest on being able to write neatly. He can use the computer to write his responses, or I can video him talking about the work. I can tailor my son's assignments so that I am assessing what really matters at each point – for example, the understanding of the subject matter, or the ability to give his essays a coherent structure. I never give him 'lines' to write and I am working hard to encourage his enjoyment of writing and to help him to discover his own writing 'voice'.

Flexible, customised, responsive education at home

All the above points are reasons why specific teachers, the specific school, or the school system in general, provided a less-than-satisfactory education for my children. Opponents of home schooling may suggest that I could simply have moved them to another school. The reason why I did not, is that I came to appreciate the positive benefits of home schooling.

I believe that home schooling provides a truly customised education for my children. For example, my eldest son hated writing when I first started home schooling him. He was a keen reader, and he could give oral responses that showed how he had understood the material covered, but if asked to write a response it would be barely one sentence, often with poor spelling and grammar. I struggled with how to get him to appreciate the importance of writing, until I found the 'Brave Writer' approach. After less than a year of following this approach, he had published several posts on his own blog, and he considered 'author' to be a possible career path.

In a similar manner, my eldest son struggled with his mathematics when we first started home schooling, and I tried several different curricula until I found one that suited him. The curriculum we settled on takes a 'mastery' approach, meaning we work in depth on each area before moving on to the next. (In schools, and in the NSW syllabus, a 'spiral' approach is preferred, learning a few pieces from each area each year, revisiting them next year and building up knowledge gradually.) We follow a different curriculum with my middle son as he grasps mathematical concepts very quickly and I would not want him to become bored if working with my eldest son.

Our approach is flexible. We are not tied to a timetable. Earlier this year, there were free performances of Shakespeare plays offered at short notice and we were able to cancel our prior commitments in order to go and watch. Just before NAIDOC week, we attended weaving workshops at Manly Community Centre and one of my sons was very keen on carrying on, so he went with another family rather than staying at home and pursuing the work we had planned for those days.

I believe I am responsive to needs and interests as they arise. We can focus on the areas we want to learn about in depth, and we can spend less time on the areas that my children

have grasped quickly. We still manage to cover the syllabus without the type of timetable that teachers follow in schools.

Many opportunities for excursions and other enrichment

My family are out and about all the time. Every week we go to at least one meet-up with other homeschooled families. I run science classes in my home, and in return another parent runs art classes in her home. We go to many workshops, plays, museums and so on. We are able to do far more of what the schools call 'enrichment' activities because we are a family rather than a school. We can choose where to spend our money, and we can decide at a moment's notice to go out if it is appropriate.

I believe that this is the real way to enthuse my children about their education. I am creating real interest in their subjects and giving them great memories for when they are older.

Time to pursue real interests and develop talents

My children undoubtedly learn best when they are allowed to pursue their interests. This is backed up by recent research in educational methods favouring a project-based, hands on approach. In addition to focussed, one-to-one sessions which explicitly cover the syllabus, we have plenty of time for my children to follow their own projects. One of my sons wants to be a computer game designer and has already designed two games and two 'mods' for Minecraft. Another is interested in science and cooking and he planned and executed a three-course meal for 15 people when he was only 9 years old.

If my children were at school, they could still pursue these interests but they certainly would not have as much time as they do now.

Opportunities to become confident members of the wider community

My eldest son travels across Sydney to meet up with his friends. I was nervous the first time he did this, but I trust him now as he has done it many times. He is confident at using public transport and knows what to do in emergencies. He is naturally quite introverted but because he travels on his own regularly, he has plenty of contact with shopkeepers, ferry staff and train staff because they see him regularly and know him. Other parents in the local community have also commented that he seems self-confident and street-savvy. I have noticed that many older home schooled children (in late teens) are confident and good at communicating with adults and I believe it is because they have been given more opportunity to do this than they might have had at school.

1.(c) Regulatory framework for home schooling including:

1.(c)(i) current registration process and ways of reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers

I have had a positive experience with the current registration process. The two authorised persons who have come to visit, for the three separate interviews I had, were friendly and supportive of home schooling.

However, I feel that I am not completely honest in the way I present our day-to-day life when the authorised person comes to interview me. I have felt scared that if I did not present our home schooling as being fairly close to school life, that I would be penalised by receiving shorter registration periods and that the authorised person would want to ‘keep tabs’ on me. We lead such rich lives but it seems that the only parts that count for the registration process are those that can be closely tied into the current NSW syllabus.

I have also heard of parents being given very short periods of registration (particularly since the new guidelines were published) and I know this makes families very nervous about the months up to, and including, the next interview. I would appreciate transparency as to what criteria the authorised person uses to decide what period of registration to give each family.

I think the process could be improved by:

- changing the training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons. (See my answer to 1. (c)(ii) below.)
- allowing a broader coverage of the Key Learning Areas rather than adherence to the same syllabus that the schools follow.
- more transparency about the criteria which authorised persons are using to decide on the term of registration.
- allowing some choice amongst home schoolers as to which authorised person comes to interview them, or at the very least allowing an appeal or second opinion if short terms of registration are given (i.e. 3 month or 6 month terms).

1.(c)(ii) training, qualifications and experience of authorised persons

The job description for authorised persons currently requires that they have had experience of delivering the NSW syllabus in schools. People with this experience can be helpful to home schoolers, but perhaps not as helpful as people who have had recent experience of home schooling. I think the experience of registration would be more positive for more home schooling families if the system were changed to include

- former or current home schoolers as authorised persons.

- requiring all authorised persons to have a basic understanding of the various home schooling philosophies (e.g. classical, project-based, literature-based and others).
- requiring all authorised persons to keep up-to-date with worldwide advances in educational practices.

1.(c)(iii) adherence to delivery of New South Wales Syllabuses

My children have many interests and their projects can cover many cross-curricular areas. For example, when my eldest son was keen on the 'Ranger's Apprentice' series of books by John Flanagan, he learned about geography, medieval history, different countries and cultures, the history of camouflage, survival skills, bush tucker and the symbolism of the oakleaf. He wrote character analyses of the characters in the book, and a book review of his favourite book in the series. He attended an archery class, designed his own shield in art class, designed and made his own oakleaf pendant similar to the ones described in the books, and he is in the process of making his own cloak with grey and green camouflage patterns on it.

His work has crossed the Key Learning Areas of English, Science and Technology, Human Society and its Environment, Creative Arts and Personal Development, Health and Physical Education. Some of the subject matter fits well within the NSW syllabus and some does not. However, I am sure that he learned more by this style of learning, and by choosing to study the work himself, than if I had waited until the subject matter appeared in the NSW syllabus. For example, it would have been pointless to tell him to wait until Year Seven before he could learn about Medieval Europe in History.

In other states of Australia, the requirement to provide a quality education for your children is not so closely linked to adherence to the state syllabus. There are similar requirements

regarding an educational program, a suitable learning environment and a way of recording activities and progress. However, it appears to me that as long as parents can demonstrate that they are covering the Key Learning Areas (which vary according to state) the registration is allowed.

It seems that NSW is the state that interprets our legal right to educate our own children in the narrowest way. I do not think that my children will suffer if I stop following the details of the NSW syllabus, as long as we still cover the Key Learning Areas. I would appreciate more freedom for them to pursue their own projects.

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

My children's physical and emotional wellbeing have been overwhelmingly better since I removed them from school. I indicated the negative effects of being at school in my answer to 1(b)(ii) above. They include bullying (physical and verbal) and being teased just for being different. My eldest son behaved well while at school but at home he showed all the indications of bullying that the school actually listed on their anti-bullying policy, including withdrawn behaviour, emotional outbursts, bedwetting, disturbed sleep and tearfulness. I communicated this to the school in several meetings and letters and they did not indicate that they would be addressing the main reasons I had removed him from school in the first place. I did not want my son to go back into an environment where he could not trust the people who were supposed to be looking after him. It is not enough for schools to have anti-bullying policies and to run special anti-bullying programs if they do not follow it up with action to stop the bullying when it happens.

In addition, the teacher of my second son, while being well-respected in the school community, was herself bullying my son by repeatedly keeping him in at recess and lunchtime to address his behaviour and handwriting, without communicating at all with me about it. She almost seemed to conceal her own behaviour by being overwhelmingly positive to me when I met her for the regular parent-teacher interview.

The school and teachers have a duty to act 'in loco parentis' and they were not fulfilling this duty.

I care deeply about my children and I have their best interests at heart. I am not a perfect parent or a perfect teacher, but I always apologise when I have not behaved well myself and I will not bully them.

The home schooling community is a supportive community. My children mix with children of their age and children older and younger than themselves. If disagreements arise, as they will do amongst children, the adults are around to model appropriate behaviour and to help the children to come to an understanding. This is far more helpful than letting children do as they please in the playground, and telling them to 'just sort it out' (which happened to my children in school when they tried to talk to the adults supposedly there to look out for them).

I have seen very few cases of teasing in the home schooling groups we attend, and I am not aware of any instances of bullying.

My children are regularly seen in our local community and further afield in Sydney. I know there are concerns that home schooling children are at a higher risk of abuse than children at school, but this has not been borne out by any figures that I have seen addressing the matter.

Furthermore, I believe that home schooling has allowed my children to blossom in the areas they are interested in and talented in, and this has done more to boost their self-esteem and self-confidence than anything else.

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

To reiterate my comments regarding 1.(c)(i), 1.(c)(ii) and 1.(c)(iii), I feel that the current regime could be improved by

- including authorised persons who have more experience and knowledge about homeschooling;
- removing narrow requirements to adhere to the NSW Syllabus (while still retaining the current Key Learning Areas);
- more transparency about the whole process of granting registration, including the criteria used to decide what period is given on the certificate;
- a means of appeal if the family feels the registration period given is too short, or if their authorised person is not sympathetic to their educational methods.

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

Currently the main support for home schooling families in Sydney is the Home Education Association and SHEN (Sydney Home Education Network). There are also small local groups which meet in certain areas of Sydney. All of these groups are led and run by volunteers.

This means that in addition to home schooling their own families they are giving advice on the telephone or by e-mail and organising events, with no remuneration. I myself have

spent many late nights e-mailing new or prospective home schoolers to let them know what is available and to guide them in their decisions.

I have heard that in Tasmania there is a government-funded body made up of home schoolers who can offer support to home schoolers. It would be great to have that kind of support. Perhaps a body like this could even replace BOSTES as the regulatory body.

In addition to the telephone and e-mail support mentioned above, I have often felt it would be good to have a dedicated website or regularly updated document with resources and links to covering the NSW syllabus. This would not be prescriptive, but just give an idea of, for example, which museums and visitor centres offered workshops that tied in with particular aspects of the syllabus. I know

BOSTES offers webpages with lists of resources (and I have used these myself) but many of these are school specific and it would be good to have a page listing resources specific to home schoolers.

Also, I am not sure of the system for accessing support from educational psychologists and occupational therapists. I have sometimes wondered about having one of my sons assessed for Asperger's Syndrome, and as I already mentioned, another one has hypermobile joints and has already benefited greatly from visiting a private occupational therapist. These services are all very expensive and it would be great if there were some system for receiving a discount, or having an approved educational psychologist, or occupational therapist who provided assessments for the home schooling community.

I have heard of families, in Victoria and other states, who use schools part-time, perhaps a set number of days per week, or perhaps for particular programs such as the sports programs. It is hard sometimes to get sufficient numbers for home schoolers to run sports programs, so it would be good if schools could offer access to their sporting facilities and

programs. I do, however, feel that it is necessary for very good communication between the specific school and the family, agreeing on the collective aims of part-time schooling, otherwise this approach could be less than helpful.

1.(e) representation of home schoolers within the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES)

If BOSTES is to continue with the regulation of home schooling it seems reasonable to expect there should be at least one representative of home educators on the Board.

The alternative would be to set up a different regulatory body, which also includes one or more representative of home educators.

Thank you for your consideration of my submission.

Yours faithfully

Samantha Nimmo