

**Submission  
No 63**

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH  
DISABILITY IN NEW SOUTH WALES EDUCATIONAL  
SETTINGS**

**Organisation:** Home Education Association, Inc.

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## **About the Home Education Association**

The Home Education Association (HEA) is Australia's peak-body homeschooling association, advocating for home education rights in all States & Territories since 2001. The HEA is run by a committee voluntarily coming together to lead the association.

The HEA upholds the principle that parents are primarily responsible for the education of their children and respects the diversity of philosophies and methods used by home educators. Our vision is to move towards an Australia where parents can freely choose home education, and where the HEA as the peak body has input into government policy.

The mission of the HEA is to promote the practice of home education across Australia, support and empower home educators and to advance educational equity for members.

Pillars - In order to achieve our mission, HEA will:

- Increase the profile of and confidence in home education
- Advocate in the interests of home education
- Empower and support home educators
- Coordinate events and conferences
- Provide services and resources for our members
- Support networks and community groups
- Engage with organisations and suppliers in the sector
- Grow the Association
- Assist home educators in need

We have established and maintain a public fund which can receive gifts of money or property for the specific purpose of providing assistance to home educators in necessitous circumstances.

## **Executive Summary**

The main points of the HEA are:

1. The NSW Educational Standards Authority (NESA) should engage with home educating families to determine the optimal way to obtain accurate data about the number of children and young people with disabilities who are currently being home educated in NSW.
2. The NSW government should carefully consider the form and function of standardised information it seeks to collect and should engage in a thorough consultation process with home educating families regarding this information collection to allay mistrust.
3. The NSW government should engage with disabled home educated students to determine whether part time home education/part time mainstream education is the best solution to meet their needs.
4. NESA should provide specific training in trauma-informed care for all of their staff who deal with home educating families, especially those with children who have disabilities.
5. Qualified psychologists could be employed by NESA to service the needs of home educated students in the same way mainstream schools have school psychologists.

## **Introduction**

The Home Education Association thanks the Committee for this opportunity to contribute feedback to its Inquiry on Children and Young People with a Disability in New South Wales Educational Settings.

It is widely acknowledged that disabled students are leaving the school system for a variety of reasons, including school related trauma, bullying, a learning environment not suited to their needs and a lack of inclusion in the school system. They enter the home education system not necessarily because they choose it but because they have no other options.

Most home educated students have been to school. Parents are not anti-school. They are concerned for the wellbeing of their children and see home education as necessary. A term for this is “school refugees”. At HEA we speak to parents who call our volunteer-staffed helpline each day telling us school isn’t working for their disabled child. Their children are often experiencing “school can’t” and parents tell us they need to look into alternatives.

## **Statement of Issues**

There are a variety of issues that lead to a lack of understanding of the reasons for and consequences of such a large number of families of students with a disability are turning to home education. These include:

1. A lack of data regarding the number of disabled students currently being home educated in NSW, the specific needs associated with their disabilities and the reasons that parents and guardians are concerned about sharing this information with the authorities;
2. The impact of insufficient funding of government schools, creating an environment of unmet needs for disabled students;
3. That little to no resources are being made available from the NSW government to support families of children with disabilities who are home schooling their children.

## **Scope of the Submission**

The Terms of Reference for the Committee cover a wide range of topics related to the delivery of education for students with disabilities, as well as possible actions to follow up on the Disability Royal Commission recommendations on inclusive education. We note that there have been many comprehensive and well-researched papers on the subject of inclusive education for students with disabilities, including the final report of the Disability Royal Commission.

The HEA wishes to highlight the issues surrounding the lack of recognition and understanding of the needs of home educated students in NSW, especially highlighted by the lack of data available about the reasons and issues behind the decision for families to home educate.

## **Key Concerns and Recommendations**

### **1. Lack of accurate data about children with disabilities in home education**

The NSW government does not report data to the NCCD with respect to disabled home educated students. The HEA has expressed concerns regarding a lack of informative data for some time. Without accurate information on the numbers of disabled home educated students it is impossible to provide adequate services to support their needs.

Anecdotally, we know disabled home educated students make up a sizeable proportion of students in the home education space. The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) collects some data on the reasons for home educating but unfortunately this information appears to be lacking. In the 2022 NSW home education annual report 17.18% ticked special learning needs as the reason for home education. However, when looking at the data “other “ received 31.69% and another 22.91% provided nil response.

In the Queensland Insight Report from 2022, 61% of children in home education were identified as having a disability and of that 46% were neurodivergent. NESA would benefit from engaging with disabled home educating students and their families to understand more about this population of home educated students.

**Recommendation** - That NESA engage with home educating families to determine the optimal way to obtain accurate data about the number of children and young people with disabilities who are currently being home educated in NSW.

## **2. School trauma as a cause of home schooling for families of children with disabilities**

In volume 7 of the Disability Royal Commission, recommendation 7.9 states “State and territory school registration authorities should...require parents registering children with disability for home schooling with the state or territory school regulator to submit standardised information about their child’s educational, social and behavioural progress and support needs to improve understanding of students with disability who are being home schooled and their outcomes.”

After experiencing school trauma, many parents and children have lost trust in the education system as a means to protect the rights of the child. As a result, asking for more detailed information from families, without proper consultation, will potentially alienate and further distress families of disabled students in home education who feel let down and traumatised by their experience in the mainstream education system. Recently, the federal government has changed the forms on the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) grant, making it harder for home educating families to access the only funding available to them. Families are concerned that their right to home educate their children, to best meet their individual needs, is being made increasingly difficult and that sharing further information regarding the school trauma that their children with disabilities experienced may further jeopardise their right to home educate.

**Recommendation** - That the NSW government carefully consider the form and function of standardised information it seeks to collect and engages in a thorough consultation process with home educating families regarding this to allay mistrust.

### **3. Flexibility to meet the needs of disabled students and their families**

The 2022 senate inquiry into school refusal made several recommendations. Recommendation 5 states that “state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector investigate ways to increase the flexibility of education delivery, including by... facilitating easier access to distance education and home schooling for students experiencing school refusal” and to enhance flexibility in mainstream school settings. In Victoria, part time schooling/part time home education is an option for students. This is not the case in NSW.

**Recommendation** - That the NSW government engage with disabled home educated students to determine whether part time home education/part time mainstream education is the best solution to meet their needs.

### **4. Necessity of trauma-informed practices when engaging with families of children and young people with disabilities who are home educating**

Recommendation 9 from the Senate inquiry into school refusal states “state and territory education authorities and the non-government school sector work together to develop resources to support the use of trauma-informed practices in schools, so they can implement best-practice methods to support students to continue with their education”. HEA has been communicating with directors of psychology practices and they tell us that school related trauma is real and is affecting disabled children they work with in their professions. Parents are communicating the very same things. They tell us that their children are experiencing autistic burnout and finding it hard to do basic self care tasks. They tell us about how their child goes into meltdown due to the trauma they experienced at school. Examples of this include ripping up worksheets or hiding under the kitchen table when asked to do bookwork. When disabled children enter the home education space there is little to no acknowledgement from NESA about education trauma and how it may impact their homeschooling in the short term.



Psychologists are telling us these children need a period of time to decompress and process the trauma to give them the best chance of reengaging with their education again.

**Recommendation** - That NESAs provide specific training in trauma-informed care for all of their staff who deal with home educating families, especially those with children who have disabilities.

**5. Mental health assistance and resources be made available for home educated students, particularly those with disabilities**

Recommendation 14 states that the “Australian Government investigate increasing the number of subsidised mental health care visits for students experiencing school refusal.” Students within the government school system often have access to school psychology services. Unfortunately, once in home education, the psychological support for students ends. This creates a myriad of challenges for parents who are commencing home education out of “necessity”. Home educated disabled students have often experienced educational trauma and yet receive no support.

**Recommendation** - That a number of qualified psychologists be employed by NESAs to service the needs of home educated students in the same way mainstream schools have school psychologists.

## **Conclusion**

In the literature that is available, we know that home education benefits disabled students in terms of their levels of anxiety and depression, is linked to positive retention rates in tertiary education and home educated students perform similarly on NAPLAN testing compared to children in mainstream education.

Home education allows disabled students to learn in an environment that suits their needs as it allows for interest based learning which is best practice for how neurodivergent students learn. Without better consultation with disabled home educating students and their families in NSW, children will not be able to reach their full potential. The voices of disabled students in home education must be heard.