

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

SELECT COMMITTEE ON HOME SCHOOLING

INQUIRY INTO HOME SCHOOLING

CORRECTED PROOF

At Sydney on 5 September 2014**

The Committee met at 9.15 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. P. Green (Chair)

Dr J. Kaye (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. D Clarke

The Hon. C. Cusack

The Hon. T Khan

The Hon. A. Searle

The Hon. H. Westwood

CHAIR: Good morning and welcome to the first hearing of the Select Committee into Home Schooling. The inquiry is reviewing the home schooling practices and comparing the practice with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand. Before I commence, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of this land. I would also pay my respects to the elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to all other Aboriginals. The hearing today is the first of two hearings we plan to hold for this inquiry. Today we will hear from the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW, the Department of Education and Communities, the Australian Home Education Service, home schooling parents, the Home Education Support and Action Network, the Sydney Home Education Network and the New South Wales Teachers Federation.

Before we commence I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures today. In terms of broadcasting, in accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, while members of the media may film or record committee members and witnesses, people in the gallery should not be the primary focus of any filming or photography. I would also remind the media representatives that you must take responsibility for what you publish about the Committee's proceedings. It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside of their evidence at the hearing, so I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments you may make to the media or to others after you complete your evidence as such comments will not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take an action for defamation. The guidelines for the broadcast proceedings are available from the secretariat.

In terms of questions on notice, there may be some questions that a witness could answer only if they had more time with certain documents to hand. In these circumstances, witnesses are advised that they can take a question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. In terms of delivery of messages to be tendered to the Committee, witnesses are advised that any messages should be delivered to the Committee members through the Committee staff, who are seated on my right and around the room. Finally, could everyone please turn their mobiles to silent.

ANNE KEENAN, Director, Registration and Accreditation Standards, Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW, and

DAVID MURPHY, Executive Director, Regulation and Governance, Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I welcome our first witnesses from the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW. Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr MURPHY: No.

Ms KEENAN: No.

CHAIR: Dr Kaye will start questions.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Thank you, Ms Keenan and Mr Murphy, for your detailed and accurate submission. There have been changes to the information package and changes to the registration package that date to 2013. Can you very briefly explain what those changes were and can you describe to us the consultation that you held with the home schooling communities?

Mr MURPHY: The information package is regularly reviewed. The most recent review that was undertaken was in 2013. The chief factors that influenced that review were the revised Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards K-10 syllabuses in English, maths, science and history. The second factor related to some feedback that the board had been receiving over a period of time that there needed to be greater clarity around some of the provisions. A lot of that feedback was coming from home schoolers or authorised persons. The third significant factor related to some suggestions that were made to the board by the Ombudsman. Those suggestions chiefly related to some procedures that the board had been applying for many years that were not as open and transparent as they needed to be. They tended to be internal documents, and the Ombudsman suggested that many of those processes would be better placed within the information package.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Regarding the final point that you have raised, do I understand that those suggestions made by the Ombudsman were contained in the Ombudsman's annual report 2012-13?

Mr MURPHY: Yes, they were.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Do I also understand that that annual report followed on what could be called "The investigation into the death of Ebony"? Is there a connection?

Mr MURPHY: No, that particular investigation related to an investigation that the Child Death Unit of the Ombudsman's office conducted, but it was not into the Ebony case. That particular case, as far as I understand, is still subject to ongoing legal proceedings, so I cannot comment on the case.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That is why I was trying to connect it in some way.

Mr MURPHY: Indeed. When that type of thing happens, we get inquiries from the Child Death Unit of the Ombudsman's office. Say the child is referred to as K—I cannot name the child—in the case of K, those inquiries were concluded and there was no further action that the board was required to take. However, during the course of those inquiries, the Ombudsman became more acquainted with the administration of home schooling and decided to conduct a preliminary investigation into the administration of home schooling. The recommendations or suggestions that emerged came from that preliminary investigation. As the Ombudsman has pointed out in his report, the board's response met the Ombudsman's requirements.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: You are obviously agreeing to a number of changes that are contained. How have you gone about implementing—I think there were five recommendations that the Ombudsman made, is that correct?

Mr MURPHY: We did provide an extract from the Ombudsman's report on page 25 of the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES] submission.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Yes, that is it.

Mr MURPHY: Would the Committee like me to go through each of those?

CHAIR: Yes.

Mr MURPHY: The first point is that regular monitoring has always been a feature of the board's administration of home schooling but what the Ombudsman observed was that it was not as explicitly stated in the information package as it should be and so up to that point we had an internal document called the "Authorised Persons Handbook", which contained those kinds of procedures and what the Ombudsman suggested was that we should make explicit reference to that procedure within the information package and we have done that.

The second point relates to capturing data related to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders and that required a change to the application form for home schooling and that was also implemented. The third point relates to the exchange of information with the Department of Education and Communities when certain circumstances arise where a family may choose to withdraw their child from a government school and related to any particular issues of dissatisfaction with the schooling that is occurring in the government school.

CHAIR: On that point we are going to have a bit of dialogue, if that is okay, with the way it works on this occasion.

Mr MURPHY: Yes, sure.

CHAIR: Have you had any success in how to better identify and resolve dissatisfaction with schools? Are you saying that people are not withdrawing their kids from school because you have a better system?

Mr MURPHY: I do not think the Ombudsman believed that the onus was on the board to make whatever improvements were required. I think the Ombudsman's view was that the department needed to be better informed when circumstances like that arose.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So this is just purely you notifying the department—

Mr MURPHY: Yes, indeed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: —that you found a bunch of parents from a particular school who have withdrawn because of a particular concern about that school?

Mr MURPHY: Yes, indeed, so where it was relevant that information was provided across to the department. I would have to say the chief caveat I put around that is that for the most part the families concerned would need to consent to that information being provided in that it does disclose personal affairs, so we do take the precaution of seeking consent before.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And do you usually get it?

Mr MURPHY: I would not say usually. That kind of experience when it does for example involve allegations of bullying, it is usually a set of circumstances where the family wishes to move on from that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can I just come back to Mr Khan's question because he was just explaining it in the context of the Ombudsman? Is that okay, just to finish the answer?

CHAIR: We are approaching bridges that many of us want to cross with the answer; that is all. Rather than come back, I think we should cross them and just keep moving forward in terms of the outcomes, unless Mr Khan has any objection.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: No, I am not going to take any strong objection to anything.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Although I do want Mr Murphy to address the last issue. I specifically want Mr Murphy at some stage to make sure he addresses the last issue,

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I am going through checking off the list, so we will get there one way or the other.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you are on notice, Mr Murphy.

CHAIR: I am doing the same but he is zigzagging across some of the stuff I want to get answers to as well and I think Mr Clarke has the same issue.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You just mentioned bullying. That is a major concern, is it, of those who want to home school their children?

Mr MURPHY: It is a concern. I would not characterise it as a major concern. It is one of the concerns.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: In your mind a valid concern?

Mr MURPHY: Well, that would be determined on the case. I could not make a generalised comment about whether it was valid or not.

CHAIR: Does BOSTES have increased statistics? We are hearing about it more and more in the media and certainly the impact of social media. From your point of view are we seeing an increase in the reports of bullying?

Mr MURPHY: I guess there has been an increase in the number of applications for home schooling so there would certainly be a proportionate increase.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you have statistics on how many children registered for home schooling have never been at a formal school environment versus the others who have been but have been withdrawn?

Mr MURPHY: We do not routinely collect statistics of that kind because in terms of our administration of home schooling it is not relevant to that administration.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: What about statistics on bullying in schools? Do you keep statistics of that?

Mr MURPHY: No, we do not.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That would be a matter more for the Department of Education and Communities?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed, and of course that kind of behaviour occurs in non-government schools as well.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: But there are various programs in schools about bullying. That would indicate there is considerable concern about bullying in schools, would it not?

Mr MURPHY: Well, there is a legitimate concern around bullying. For example, a few years back there was, I think, a Legislative Council committee—

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is correct, yes there was.

Mr MURPHY: Okay, and there were changes that came from the work of that committee, which involved, for example, the registration requirements for non-government schools having an explicit reference to the anti-bullying policies that the school had in place, so it is an issue that is of obvious concern but remediating bullying in schools is not a responsibility of the board.

CHAIR: Statistics in the Queensland internal review show that a lot of people have a misconception about why people are home schooling. Probably the top reason was social interaction issues at school and bullying.

Mr MURPHY: If I can comment on my experience?

CHAIR: By all means.

Mr MURPHY: In my experience, the chief reason that people home school appears to be a quite positive view of home schooling per se, not merely as a response to the shortcomings that they may feel in schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: About 50 per cent of your registrants fill in the reason why they are home schooling, is that correct?

Mr MURPHY: I do not recall the figure offhand.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Did they fill in whether or not they have ever been in a formal school? Are they asked that question?

Mr MURPHY: No, I do not believe they are.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So we have no idea how many of the 3,238 children have been withdrawn from school?

Mr MURPHY: Not unless they explicitly make mention of that in their application. It is not information that is relevant to our consideration.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Why not, and I am not being critical?

Mr MURPHY: I guess the reason for that is that the regulation of home schooling is prescribed within the Education Act and so we can only have regard to the relevant considerations of what the Act requires and providing information in relation to the mode of schooling that may have been followed up to the point of the application is not, in and of itself, relevant to us considering that. So you could have a child who is home schooled from the equivalent of kindergarten and has never attended a school.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: We want to ascertain how many kids are in that category.

Mr MURPHY: Indeed. My answer to that is: Whilst it would provide a good background to the reasons why people do home school, it is not relevant to the board's consideration of applications.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: In essence you are neutral on the issue of home schooling; you are simply looking at implementing it?

Mr MURPHY: Quite so.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The board is neutral on all matters.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am not asking the witness to make a value judgement. I would have thought that in assessing an application it would be relevant to know the prior educational experiences of a child.

Mr MURPHY: So where it is relevant, in terms of making an assessment about the educational needs of the child—and that point was made during our discussions with the Ombudsman—in terms of the authorised person's assessment of what is an appropriate educational program for a child, they would have regard to what, if any, prior education they had experienced either in a government or non-government school, but that is not something we capture statistically.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You would have the raw data to do that? You would have a dataset that talked about who was registered and when they were registered?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: From that dataset you could extract the data that the Hon. Catherine Cusack is looking for?

Mr MURPHY: I guess if I could take that on notice?

CHAIR: You can take the question on notice. I note that when applying to home school their children parents are asked if their child has an educational issue or special needs. Many home educators have stated that their children had had educational issues or special needs probably for the last four years. Would you be able to provide statistics for 2010, 2011, 2012 and 2013? Once again, when applying to home school their children parents also have the opportunity to nominate whether they home school for philosophical or religious reasons because their child has special education needs or for other reasons. Would you also be able to provide those statistics?

Mr MURPHY: We will provide it if we have captured that information.

CHAIR: It is my understanding that it is on the application form.

Mr MURPHY: If I could clarify the point, it is optional. They can choose not to provide that information.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Do you keep statistics on educational results achieved by those in home schooling?

Mr MURPHY: I guess the quick answer is no. There are examples of where that occurs but not for the purpose of home schooling. The BOSTES is also responsible for the administration of NAPLAN and the Higher School Certificate. Indeed, one of the research projects that we agreed to commission, at the suggestion of the Ombudsman, was that we look at the relationship between home schooling and how students perform in standardised tests such as NAPLAN and the Higher School Certificate.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: From where could we get that information?

Mr MURPHY: That research is happening right now and, as our submission states, we expect that research to be completed by the end of October and a report will be produced as a result of that research.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: This has never been done before?

Mr MURPHY: No.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It has not been done by BOSTES before.

Mr MURPHY: It has not been done by the board, no.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are you aware of other studies?

Mr MURPHY: Not that I am aware of, no.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Chair, I invite that we go through the balance of the points?

CHAIR: Yes.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I think we are up to point three. Was there anything further you wanted to say about point three?

Mr MURPHY: No.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Moving then to point four.

Mr MURPHY: As I have said, we have commenced research into the academic attainment of home schooled children. As our submission states, there needs to be a caveat to that—namely, it is not a requirement

for home school children to undertake the NAPLAN tests nor is it a requirement that they undertake the Higher School Certificate. It would only be—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It is not a requirement for any student to undertake the Higher School Certificate.

Mr MURPHY: Indeed, it would only be those parents who choose to present their children for those examinations who will be captured by that research.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In that study how are you going to correct for the population bias? Obviously home school parents come from particular demographics.

Mr MURPHY: I am not a statistician but the board does employ psychometricians who do have experience in making adjustments for those kinds of factors.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Including adjustments for those who might suffer some sort of disability, which is the reason for their home schooling?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed. I guess in that type of analysis, without wanting to pre-empt what the research will produce, they will have regard to how that particular sample population of home schoolers compares to other sectors.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I am going to distract you from going to point five. Dr Kaye's question to you on point four included a presumption that there is an identifiable demographic of home schoolers—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Plural: demographics.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I am sorry for my lack of the Queen's English. Do you agree with Dr Kaye's presumption?

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is in the submission.

Mr MURPHY: Without wanting to take away from what is in our submission, the home schooling community is as diverse as, if not more, any other sector of society. I do not think you could readily generalise.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Parents who are going to home school by definition have an interest in education and that has an impact on children's outcome. If a child from the same parents, the same socio-economic status, was home schooled or went into a public school, private school or Catholic school what would be the difference in outcome? They are not a random sample; there are biases in the demographics.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Somebody could be interested in medicine and that may make them interested in quackery. An interest in the subject does not make a person any more or less skilled.

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, there is an interest in education in general. The question is for Mr Murphy to answer.

Mr MURPHY: I guess the answer to that is that there are certain demographic factors that you can align to but that is only suggestive of trends rather than being able to deal with what would precisely happen if a child had not been home schooled but instead had attended a government or non-government school. We know, for example, the location of the child and we can make an assumption about if they had attended a government or non-government school. In the general locality of where a child lives one can make some assumptions around that but, again, I would imagine that the psychometric analysis will—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mr Murphy, in your submission you have very helpfully provided the Committee with the terms of reference for that inquiry. On notice could you provide the Committee with more detail as to how that inquiry is being conducted, specifically with respect to the questions that Mr Khan and I have raised?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer you to the last dot point in the issues the Ombudsman raised with you—namely, a link between children known to Community Services and those being home schooled. On page 17 of your submission you mention 283 families where BOSTES has exchanged information with the Department of Community Services [DOCS]. Does that explicitly refer to 283 home schooling families?

Mr MURPHY: I am sorry?

Dr JOHN KAYE: I refer you to page 17 of your submission, third bottom paragraph: "Under Chapter 16A, the BOSTES routinely provides and receives information relating to children and young persons. Since 2010, the BOSTES has ..." Does that explicitly refer to 283 home schooling families?

Mr MURPHY: Yes, I believe that is the case.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That means roughly 15 per cent of home schooling families have been notified to DOCS?

Mr MURPHY: I guess that also includes applicants for home schooling, so that may include those who have applied but have had their applications refused.

Dr JOHN KAYE: For any reason or specifically for child protection reasons?

Mr MURPHY: The requirements for registration are the only reasons that we can have regard to.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But some of those might be purely educational.

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You might assess that a parent simply does not have the capacity to educate a child or you might assess that the home schooling environment in that family would be unsafe. For example, you would not tell the child protection authorities, "We will not let Mr Khan educate his children because he is not suitable for education." That would be 15 per cent of families who either applied—I suppose it is a bigger pool because some applied and were rejected?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Your 15 per cent figure is probably too high; it would still be in the order of 10 per cent of families because not that many are rejected?

Mr MURPHY: I cannot do those kinds of calculations in my head.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But it would still be higher. Can you get back to us with the percentage of home school families? Can you break that number down for us? It appears to me that even when you take out the relatively small number of families that you reject that there is an exceptionally high rate of exchange of information. Can you provide the Committee with an explanation for that?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: I seek some clarification. Were those 283 families that had children in home schooling?

Mr MURPHY: It is stated on page 17 of our submission that those referrals are related to 346 children, and those figures include those children for whom an application was made and also those children who might have already been registered for home schooling. So it includes both categories.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Are you going to dissect those figures so that the Committee knows how many of those 346 children are in home schooling?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You can dissect that?

Mr MURPHY: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You are going to take that question on notice?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: The Committee will then know exactly how many of those children are actually in home schooling?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Or were.

CHAIR: Can the Committee have a breakdown of the whole thing? That is for home schooling, but for how many schools in the New South Wales education system do you have that breakdown?

Mr MURPHY: We do not hold that kind of information.

Dr JOHN KAYE: They would not do the sort of work.

CHAIR: If you can say 15 per cent that means there is 85 per cent somewhere else and I want to know what that 85 per cent represents.

Dr JOHN KAYE: My calculation, which may now be wrong, is that 15 per cent of families in home schooling were involved in the exchange of information between the board and DOCS, which is an extraordinarily high figure. It could be a random sample of families in the community.

Mr MURPHY: Again, without knowing what the other side of that statistic was in terms of what proportion relate to children and families that attend a government or non-government schools I genuinely cannot comment on that.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You are not accepting the proposition that has been put to you?

Mr MURPHY: No. I just do not know.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is a question not a proposition.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: That followed from that question.

Mr MURPHY: I can provide information about the statistics. I cannot provide information at this point as to whether that is higher or lower than the general population. I do not have those statistics to hand.

CHAIR: Dr Kaye was asking about consultation as part of putting a new pack together for 2013 and you met with different stakeholders to address that and make those changes. In May the home schooling participants put forward a 10,000 signature petition to Parliament. There were two parts to that petition.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Chair, did you say the home schooling parents put forward a 10,000 signatures petition?

CHAIR: That's right.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: There are not 10,000 home schooling parents.

CHAIR: I did not say all of them were home schooling parents. I said it was put forward by home schooling parents. There were two major parts to that petition. This is in light of consultation. It states:

The undersigned petitioners therefore ask the Legislative Assembly to:

- (1) Ensure the 2013 Registration for Home Schooling in NSW- Information Package and all associated documentation is immediately withdrawn and a reversion to the 2011 Information Package, and the registration practices in place at the time of the publication of the 2011 Package, is implemented.

- (2) Acknowledge issues raised by NSW home schooling families, and conduct a fair and thorough consultation process leading to a mutually agreeable approach to registration which is supportive of home schoolers, their children, and their approach to education, and which acknowledges parents' responsibility for their child's education and the State's duty to ensure every child receives an education of the highest quality.

What would your response be in light of Dr Kaye's comments about consultation when you have that situation arising?

Mr MURPHY: There have been concerns about the efficacy of the board's consultation process around the information package and we acknowledge that.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Do you agree with it?

Mr MURPHY: There are two sides to every story.

CHAIR: That is why we are having this inquiry.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can you describe for us what your consultation process is. What consultation occurred?

Mr MURPHY: The view we took was that the consultation around the revised syllabuses was sufficient in and of itself in that home schoolers, along with Government schools and non-government schools, were invited to participate in the board's consultation around its revised K to 10 syllabuses. The view around the more procedural changes that were put to us by the Ombudsman was that those changes to the information package did not amount to change to the board's procedures. We took the view that there was not a need to explicitly consult about those.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Because the procedures themselves were not changed so there is no requirement for a change from a home schooling parent or a potential home schooling parent?

Mr MURPHY: There was no change to the registration requirements. There was a more explicit reference to the BOSTES processes within the information package.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are providing more information, that is all?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed. I acknowledge that is a contested view.

CHAIR: It was 10,000 people contested that view.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Did they even see the form, chair? We know how petitions are done.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I want to hear Mr Murphy's answer to this?

Mr MURPHY: At the time we received—I do not have the exact statistics to hand—about 60 to 70 individuals who corresponded with either the Minister, the board directly or via their local member of Parliament and had concerns about the information package. I am not familiar with the way in which these kinds of petitions are developed and cannot comment on about the background, or the extent of knowledge the people who signed the petition would have around the way that home schooling is administered in this State. It is difficult for me to comment on that.

CHAIR: Can I ask the board to present to this Committee a copy of the 2011 document—which we have—with the changes that were made in 2013 package highlighted? Can you supply that to the Committee?

Mr MURPHY: I can supply a summary of the changes, yes.

CHAIR: No, I want to see what the parents filled out in 2011 and this is 2013.

Dr JOHN KAYE: A track change version of the IP.

CHAIR: I want to know exactly what the changes were. The feedback from home schoolers is that there were substantial changes. So much so that it caused them to get a network of 10,000 people to sign the

petition. Whether they understood what they were signing or not is another question, but it was obviously significant enough to meet with the Minister, the Board of Studies or anyone who would listen to them to say it is too onerous. It goes on to say there was a 600 per cent increase in three month registrations. Something is not right. Trying to find out what is the sticking point in the 2013 package is very important to this inquiry.

Mr MURPHY: To take Dr Kaye's point, the board does not have a document which has tracked changes. If the Committee requires us to produce such a document—

CHAIR: I do and I would like that.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: The reasons for the change, as has been pointed out by this witness, include at least three different dot points, one being the Ombudsman's recommendation following the death of a child. I know this may be a matter for deliberation but if changes have been made to the procedure because the death of a child highlighted shortcomings I do not know whether looking at changes in a form per se is going to produce a satisfactory answer as to what we should do.

CHAIR: That is a reasonable comment the Hon. Trevor Khan, but I want to see the sticking point. The inquiry is being held because the 2013 package is different to the 2011 package and it has upset a lot of the community. Let us have a look at what that change was, even if it legitimately followed the Ombudsman's report. I have no problem with child protection but let us look at what the people on the ground find difficult with the process. The inquiry is about ensuring kids have the best education no matter what part of the education process they are involved in.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Whether parents are satisfied with the form is different to whether children get good educational outcomes.

CHAIR: That is the authorised person comes in. Mr Murphy, some of the submissions show that people have issues with authorised persons. Is there a code of conduct for authorised persons?

Mr MURPHY: The Authorised Persons Handbook is attached to the board's submission. It outlines the specific requirements that relate to authorised persons. The board also has an overarching code of conduct and ethics for all of its staff.

CHAIR: That is peer assessment? If someone has an issue with an authorised person and puts forward a complaint do you get someone from within the department to peer assess the issues and the complaint against an authorised person?

Mr MURPHY: It depends whether the complaint is about the conduct of the authorised person or whether it is about the recommendation that the authorised person has made. The overwhelming numbers of concerns about authorised persons are about the recommendation they have made rather than the conduct of the authorised person. There is a distinction between how complaints about conduct and concerns about the recommendation are dealt with. We deal with complaints about authorised persons in the same way as we deal with complaints about any of our staff. There is no particular process that applies to them. If it is a concern about the authorised person's recommendation then the Administrative Decisions Review Act provides for the process to be followed in that regard.

CHAIR: If you have a potentially overzealous authorised person—and I have recently written to the Minister Ajaka to address this—trying to achieve what their outcomes are meant to be but they have somehow missed the needs of a family given the complications of the family, how do you bring that authorised person back into some sort of dialogue and say, "Maybe you are a bit over zealous, I understand you are you are doing your job"?

Mr MURPHY: Before we reach that point we do not presume the conduct has occurred. When dealing with those kinds of complaints we have an obligation to deal with it in a procedurally fair way, which includes obtaining the views of the authorised person concerned. It may be that those views do not coincide. The board, as the authorised person's employer, has to make a judgement based on the facts before it and that would vary from case to case. We do not immediately presume that any complaint we get is well founded. We make no judgement at all.

CHAIR: That is fair, as you earlier said there are two sides of the story. If you had a situation where home schoolers need compassion and mercy because of a sick child and the registration is hard up against that situation, surely you would use compassion to give leeway in a case like that?

Mr MURPHY: I am aware of the case that has been raised.

CHAIR: I hope you are.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It is a bit hard for the rest of us.

CHAIR: I am trying to do a case study that does not implicate anyone.

Mr MURPHY: I will not comment on that particular case in that it would disclose the personal affairs of the individual concerned. To take my earlier comment there are two sides to every story. That particular complaint was raised with you, I understand, second-hand rather than by the person concerned. The facts available to the board are at variance with the substance of the complaints as they were presented to you.

Dr JOHN KAYE: On page 15 you make the observation that very few applications are refused. What happens when an application is refused, is that child monitored in any way to make sure they turn up elsewhere in the education system?

Mr MURPHY: When the recommendation for refusal has gone through all of the process and in the event that there is an internal review and in the event that there is an appeal to the Civil and Administrative Tribunal, if it does result in a refusal, then the board refers that particular case to the Department of Education and Communities.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Including the identity and address of the child?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed. The reason for that is that under the Education Act that is one of the functions of the department.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Then I should ask the department about what happens next?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: With regard to the statistics at the top of page 16, which follows on from the comments with regard to "very few," the paragraph at the bottom of page 15 states:

Relative to the number of applications received, very few applications are refused for the reason of failing to demonstrate compliance with the requirements for home schooling registration during an assessment of the application.

What are the other reasons for refusing an application?

Mr MURPHY: The other reason can be if there are court orders relating to the child where those court orders may require that both parents consent in the case of educational decisions around the child.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: What we are talking about is family law matters?

Mr MURPHY: Yes. You may have a situation where the non-residential parent does not consent, in which case it would be unlawful for the board to grant the application.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Are you able to identify the number of those for those years? The statistics at the top of page 16 are very useful but it would be equally useful to identify the other reasons for refusal and an overall level of refusal.

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I will now turn to the issue of age appropriate curriculum. There have been a number of submissions to the inquiry that say the board is too restrictive in the way it enforces the age requirements in the curriculum. For example, it forces students to do year 10 when some parents say that their student is ready to be doing year 11 or 12 materials. How do you respond to that?

Mr MURPHY: That was one of the pieces of misinformation that was being distributed. The way that we dealt with that along with other factually incorrect statements about the information package was that we produced a frequently asked questions and answers section on the board's website and that particular issue was directly addressed in one of those questions. If a home schooling family wants to accelerate the learning of a child beyond, say, year 10 for which they are registered then they can do that. The way in which the registration certificates are framed very much recognises that there is diversity in terms of the learning programs. For example, a child might be registered for primary education, particularly if they had special education needs.

The particular change that we made, I think it was in 2010, around putting years of schooling or designating whether it was primary or secondary education was motivated by a change to the Act where there was a requirement in some cases for a home schooling family to have evidence that the child was engaged in education at the year 10 level or beyond for the purposes of the attendance requirements of the Act. In 2010 there were changes made so that the children either had to attain the age of 17 or be in other approved education and training.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is a legal requirement?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

CHAIR: Can you articulate what the change of policy was in the 2013 information package that everyone got upset with?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Not everyone got upset with it.

CHAIR: You are quite correct. It was not everybody. Some people got upset with it.

Mr MURPHY: It is the board's view that there was not a change of policy, and that is a contested view.

CHAIR: But what was the policy change?

Mr MURPHY: The board's view was that there was not a change of policy but we acknowledge that is a contested view.

CHAIR: Can you tell me what part of the 2013 package change brought about all the anxiety for some parents?

Mr MURPHY: In terms of those people that corresponded with the board either directly or indirectly, there was a range of concerns around the view that the information package placed new limitations on the way in which learning programs could be developed and delivered. As I said previously, we addressed all of those concerns once we became aware of them in terms of our questions and answers information on the board's website. For example, there was a view that the information package precluded any learning outside the home. By any plain reading of the information package that was not correct but we took the opportunity to place that as a question and answer on our website to make it clear to those who had misunderstood it that that was not a limitation. There were a variety of what I would characterise as misunderstandings that were not borne out by any plain reading of the information package.

CHAIR: But in some of the submissions people who have been knocked back in their registration are of the view that the way they deliver it is the way they used to do it and they feel they are being knocked back because that has now been restricted.

Mr MURPHY: My reading of the submissions, and I can assure you I went through them all, was that when that type of issue arose it was more that the merits of compliance with the board's syllabuses was the issue. Many of the people who made submissions, albeit not a majority, made the point that they believed they should be able to pursue a learning program for their child that was not based on and taught in accordance with the board's syllabuses. That requirement has been in place for many years and it has not changed. That is a requirement that is specified in the Act.

CHAIR: That would allow a parent whose child is bad at maths and really good at art to juggle those things to ensure they are getting the best outcome for the child where they could move forward, slow it up or mix and match.

Mr MURPHY: The board's syllabuses are not framed in lock-step years. They are framed in terms of stages so that does provide a fair degree of flexibility. The way in which the board assesses whether or not a learning program is based on and taught in accordance with the board's syllabuses is to have regard to whether or not the learning program achieves the outcomes which are stated in the board's syllabuses.

CHAIR: How did we arrive at a 600 per cent increase in three monthly registrations if everything was going along hunky dory? How is it that people were moving through the 2011 information package and there was not much change in the 2013 package yet we seem to have this flood of three monthly rather than long-term registrations?

Mr MURPHY: Sorry, I do not recall where the 600 per cent figure came from.

CHAIR: It is a research figure. I may need to give you a reference, but it was a question to the Minister without notice some time ago. I am quite happy to say it was not 600 but it was a huge percentage increase on three monthly registrations.

Mr MURPHY: The only time that I am aware that that kind of figure has been cited may have been in one of the submissions.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I thought it was in one of the submissions.

Mr MURPHY: The board would not accept that figure. The other point to make about that is even if the percentage gave the appearance of being high it is from a very low base. There just are not that many. If you went from 10 to 20 that is a 100 per cent increase.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: But if you went from 10 to 60 that is a 600 per cent increase.

Mr MURPHY: Indeed, but in the context of around 3,500 children being registered for home schooling it is a matter from one year to the next whether it is statistically significant.

CHAIR: The spirit of it was whether a lot of people had suddenly been compromised with their registration because of the difference in packages. I think that is the conclusion we are trying to draw.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: The figures on the number of home schooling kids are at page 8.

CHAIR: I am not going to debate those figures because they are presented by the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES]. I would need to go back and research that figure of 600. My researcher came up with that figure so it was obviously based on something.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I would note that on page 8 it says that as at 31 December 2013 the percentage of children registered for one to three months was 0.3 per cent. If those figures can be presented for December 2013 it is possible for them to be provided for the years 2009-10, 2010-11 and 2011-12?

Mr MURPHY: I believe so, yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I understand that having children with special needs is often a reason identified by applicants for home schooling. Do you have any data on the level or range of disability? Are we talking about children with learning difficulties or dyslexia right through to children with profound intellectual disabilities or sensory disabilities such as being deaf and blind? Are those children also home schooled?

Mr MURPHY: There are children who are home schooled who would be in each of those groups or most of those groups, without wanting to be too general about it. There is a very broad range of children with disabilities who are home schooled.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Are those home schoolers then assessed in terms of their ability to provide special education and how do they demonstrate that to you?

Mr MURPHY: That might be something I will ask Ms Keenan to comment on.

Ms KEENAN: The process for assessing an application always incorporates some discussion with the parent around the particular needs of his or her child. The requirement to base and teach in accordance with the BOSTES syllabuses would also apply albeit with particular adjustments that the parent might make to ensure that the program to be delivered is meeting the requirements. Part of the discussion also involves where a parent provides that information and any specialist reports or other programs that the child might be participating in.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: There is no requirement that the home schooler has particular expertise in special education if they wanted to home school a child who, for example, was deaf and blind?

Ms KEENAN: To seek registration for home schooling a parent does not have to have any particular qualifications, including teaching or special education qualifications. The assessment is based on the program that is put together for the child.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Can you describe the process for seeking exemption from registration and how you determine whether people meet the eligibility criteria for exemption?

Mr MURPHY: The only difference between exemption and registration is that many people have a conscientious objection to the State granting registration certificates of any kind in relation to their children. The process that people who apply for exemption follow is exactly the same as the process that other people would need to follow for registration purposes. It is simply that they receive a document that says they are exempt from registration. There is no change in terms of the kinds of requirements that they must meet. It is an acknowledgment that there are people who have a philosophical objection to governments intruding into their children's lives to the extent of them being required to have a registration certificate.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: But then they still have to meet all the other government requirements?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do they simply have to claim that they have conscientious objection? Do they have to demonstrate that they practise a particular faith or subscribe to a philosophy?

Mr MURPHY: From memory, it is religiously based. They have to make that statement.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is religious, not political?

Mr MURPHY: Yes. We do not require people to demonstrate or to provide evidence that they have a particular religious belief; it is sufficient to state that they do. For practical purposes, those parents have to meet the same requirements. It is more a symbolic statement than a different regulatory regime.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Is the registration for one parent or both parents?

Mr MURPHY: The Act requires only one parent to apply. Having said that, I refer back to my earlier comments about when court orders are in place for a child. We must have regard to whether it is lawful for us to register a child if a court order requires dual consent.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: To be the registered home schooler?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do you have a gender breakdown for home schoolers?

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is in the report.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I would like you to respond to some accusations that have been made against the board in the Home Education Association [HEA] submission. Have you read the submission?

Mr MURPHY: I have. It is very long.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I will take you through it; I do not expect you to remember them all. Page 14 of the submission states:

Many NSW home educators find the current registration processes to be burdensome, intrusive, unsupportive and more focussed on compliance than on educational quality.

Can you respond?

Mr MURPHY: My first response is to ask how you define "many". I am sure that there are a number of home schooling families who would hold that view, and I am not contesting their right to do so. However, the board has a set of regulations that it is required to administer under the Act. Many of the concerns relate to the requirement for courses delivered to children to be based on and in accordance with the Board syllabuses. Many of the concerns relate to the view expressed by some that that is far too limited. The board would obviously have a different view about the value of following its syllabuses when delivering courses. What was the last part of the question?

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is said that the registration process is "more focussed on compliance than on education quality". That complaint seems to run through a lot of what the association is saying.

Mr MURPHY: It is worth making the point that the way the Act is framed is very much around compliance, unlike the way schooling occurs in government and nongovernment schools. There are no eligibility requirements to enrol or to attend a government or nongovernment school, but in the case of home schooling there are eligibility requirements.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Specified in the Act?

Mr MURPHY: Yes. It is a different context, so there is greater emphasis on compliance because of the way the Act is constructed. Having said that, the board certainly does not favour the view that its authorised persons are auditors. These people are highly regarded professional educators. While one aspect of their work is to monitor compliance, authorised persons also provide professional advice to home schooling families. I would not accept that as a generalisation.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The association's submission goes on to state:

The current registration process is open to change without meaningful consultation with home educators.

Is that true?

Mr MURPHY: The 2013 information package is certainly contested.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I understand that you say there was no change to the registration process.

Mr MURPHY: There was no change to registration requirements. The information package made the existing process more explicit in a publicly available document.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But can you change the process without consultation?

Mr MURPHY: The Minister's expectation is that we will consult about a material change to the information package before it will be approved. When we became aware of the contested view about the 2013 information package we took steps to engage in a consultation process with both the HEA and other home schooling representative bodies. However, one of the HEA preconditions even to talk to us was that the 2013 package be withdrawn. That was not something we were prepared to do.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: So there was no consultation as a result?

Mr MURPHY: That was not our choice. We invited various peak home schooling bodies to consult with us once we became aware of their concerns. However, to date the HEA has said that it will not talk to us unless we withdraw the 2013 information package.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Has anyone from the HEA spoken to you about it?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you have consulted with officeholders from the HEA?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Did they put that condition in writing?

Mr MURPHY: Yes, they did.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you table that correspondence to assist the Committee?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

CHAIR: I refer to the Ombudsman's comments about the Board of Studies NSW. He suggested that the registration process could be improved. Some of the submissions talk about having a home schooling advisory body given that the BOSTES does not have a home schooling representative. We would have liked to see that given that it is an integral part of the New South Wales education system. I note your reasons for that.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Who is "we"?

CHAIR: Reverend the Hon. Fred Nile and me. I do not mind putting that on the record. In light of the Ombudsman's comments about transparency in the registration process, would it not be wise and helpful to have an advisory council comprising representatives of the home schooling organisations?

Mr MURPHY: Putting aside what you would call it, the board has a well-established record of engaging with key stakeholders. The board would be very open to consulting regularly with a group of representative home schoolers.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: In the form of an advisory board or consultative group? Could it be formalised?

Mr MURPHY: It could be a board or a committee, but the board now deals with formal groups.

CHAIR: Any involved in home schooling representatives?

Mr MURPHY: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How do you get customer feedback from home schooling families?

Mr MURPHY: It is usually gathered from the reports that we get from authorised persons. They are on the ground.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So you do not undertake an annual survey of the families asking how they are going, what can be improved and what are your strengths?

Mr MURPHY: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How do you identify issues and get feedback from a management point of view to ensure that you continuously improve in terms of how the people you are regulating are responding to that regulation?

Mr MURPHY: The feedback is chiefly from authorised persons. However, I also make the point that home schoolers—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am not asking about what feedback you get from your staff but from the consumers of the regulation; that is, from the people who are being regulated. Setting aside what the staff are saying, what systems does the board have in place to get regular feedback from these families and children?

Mr MURPHY: I was about to say that we receive regular correspondence from home schooling families outlining their particular concerns. The home schooling community is not shy of letting the board know its views about particular matters. If you wanted to align the amount of correspondence we receive from the government and nongovernment school parent population with the amount we receive from home schoolers, I think home schooling correspondence would be disproportionately high.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: To answer the question, you are relying on letters sent by the families; that is the feedback you get. How is that then pulled together and reported on so that, for example, members of on the Board of Studies NSW can get feedback about how families are feeling and so that issues can be reflagged when things go wrong? If you are relying on letters, are they being consolidated and reported upon annually so that people can see how it is trending?

Mr MURPHY: Not at the moment.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Why would you not have a formalised consultative process? Why would you rely upon people sending letters? Are you opposed to having a consultative process?

Mr MURPHY: No.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Would you support it?

Mr MURPHY: The prevailing view among many home schooling families is that they prefer to have a certain distance between themselves and the board. These are people who often have objections to any government regulation that relates to the education of their children. The fact that we have not tried to impose any kind of consultative structure on the home schooling community should not be interpreted as an unwillingness to do so.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Are you saying that consumers—to use the Hon. Catherine Cusack's term—are resisting a formalised consultative process?

Mr MURPHY: Not refusing, but there is a certain reluctance to engage. In the case of the 2013 information package and seeing what improvements we could make to it, there was an outright refusal.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you asked them about whether they want to be consulted? If so, did they say they did not?

Mr MURPHY: In terms of the representative groups, yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: And they said, "We don't want to be part of any consultation"?

Mr MURPHY: Because as a precondition they demanded that the board withdrew the 2013 information package.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: No, I am not talking about that issue. We are now talking about ongoing consultation in relation to the regulation of the sector.

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is the regulation of the sector.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, but the establishment of the consultative committee, for example, we have been told would be an imposition.

Mr MURPHY: No, no.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That they do not want it to be imposed on them in that way. That is my question. Are you—

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is not what Mr Murphy said at all.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Sorry, but it is.

CHAIR: We will just put this on record and then break for morning tea, if you have finished?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Sure.

CHAIR: Up to 10,000 people, supporters or those concerned about home schooling gave customer feedback and one petition.

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

CHAIR: The second thing they did because they felt they were not being heard was to ask for this inquiry. I take it, Mr Murphy, that you did acknowledge that you would like to engage in a consultative way with a consultative body?

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

CHAIR: I am sure that will be very helpful for the outcome of this inquiry.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I think Mr Murphy should have the right to reply to that. You have put Mr Murphy in a difficult position with that statement. Do you want a right to reply to that, Mr Murphy?

Mr MURPHY: I guess my only response is that I do not think it is as clear-cut as has been characterised. There are many home schoolers, from my experience, who do not wish to have the kind of close relationship with the Board of Studies simply because they wish to keep a certain distance from government.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: But some do wish to have that?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Have you sought to engage and have a consultation process with those who wish to consult?

Mr MURPHY: Indeed, and that certainly—

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You have a permanent body?

Mr MURPHY: That certainly received some renewed vigour following the concerns around the 2013 information package.

CHAIR: Thank you for presenting today. We have held perhaps a right of reply for you after we hear from other witnesses. The secretariat will communicate when we work that out to ensure we hear both sides of the story, so to speak. Thank you for attending and being part of the hearing. I note also that you have 21 days within which to provide answers to questions you have taken on notice. Of course, the secretariat will give you a hand with that if you need.

Mr MURPHY: Yes.

CHAIR: Once again, thank you for what you do in education; it is very important. Thank you for giving us your side of the story this morning.

Mr MURPHY: Thank you very much.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

BRIAN SMYTH KING, Executive Director, Learning and Engagement, Department of Education and Communities,

MICHAEL WATERHOUSE, Director Legal Services, Department of Education and Communities, and

PAUL LENNOX, Child Protection, Student Engagement and Interagency Partnerships, Department of Education and Communities, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Welcome to the inquiry. Does anyone wish to make an opening statement?

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes. I would like to just, I guess, talk to the submission we have put in regarding some really key elements in terms of the role of the Department of Education and Communities in this area of education. The education of children has been compulsory in New South Wales for over a hundred years. In that time it really reflects the role education plays in the overall development and wellbeing of children as they grow into adulthood. Children engaged in education are more likely to learn, achieve, have educational success and have much, much improved career life options and outcomes in adult life. They are more likely to be positive and active contributors to society. So it plays a very important role in young people moving into adult life. The Education Act 1990 provides that the education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child's parent. It further states that it is the duty of the State to ensure that every child receives an education of the highest quality. The Act defines the responsibilities for parents to ensure compulsory schooling and provides options for how these responsibilities are met.

CHAIR: Could you table that document?

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes, I could table it. Parents can choose to enrol their child in a government or registered non-government school or seek registration through BOSTES for home schooling. Parents have the right to choose the type of education they believe will best meet their child's need while being consistent with the legislative requirements we have. The Education Act prescribes also that the curriculum and access to it for children and young people in the compulsory years of schooling is the responsibility of BOSTES. It develops the syllabuses that are taught in New South Wales schools from kindergarten to year 12. The department recognises that home schooling is a legitimate and well-established pathway for children to receive an education in line with parent choice. The Act limits the periods of each registration for home schooling to two years. In this context, the department is the largest provider of compulsory schooling in Australia. We have more than 740,000 students enrolled in our government schools. The number of children and young people registered for home schooling has increased in recent years. In 2012-13 it was 3,327 young people and in 2009-10 it was 2,443.

In this context, the department has responsibility for ensuring the regular attendance of students in government schools. The department also has responsibility to intervene when it becomes aware a child or a young person may not be enrolled in a government or registered non-government school or registered with BOSTES for home schooling. Information on this may be received by the department from a variety of sources: from members of the community, another agency or from BOSTES itself. In these circumstances the department, through its Home School Liaison Program, will intervene to ensure that the child is receiving compulsory schooling. In undertaking this role, the department ensures that the child's parents are aware of their obligations to ensure that the child receives an education consistent with the Act. The department supports the family to enrol the child in a school or provide information and contacts for the parent to apply for home schooling.

In discharging its responsibilities to ensure every child and young person engages in compulsory schooling, the department may take legal action on behalf of the Minister where parents fail to meet their compulsory schooling obligations under the Act. In 2013 the department's Home School Liaison Program intervened in 79 cases where children or young people of compulsory school age were not enrolled in a school or registered for home schooling. Nearly all of these matters were resolved without the need for legal action. Court action has proceeded in only two of these cases. In 2014 to date the program has intervened in 54 cases with four matters commencing in court. In two cases the matter was withdrawn after the children and young people were registered for home schooling.

In recent years there has been a significant government and community focus on children and young people engaged in education. This has been variously commented on in a number of reports and inquiries,

including by the New South Wales Ombudsman. This focuses recognition on the critical role that education plays in a child's development and growth into adulthood. School attendance and its relationship with child protection has been the subject of substantial reform in New South Wales. In recent years the most significant report in this regard was the Wood special commission, which was released in November 2008. That commission was titled the Special Commission of Inquiry into Child Protection Services in NSW. The report strongly recognises the importance of compulsory schooling. Commissioner Wood stated in that report that the importance of participation in school as a protective factor, which mitigates against extreme risk-taking, is reinforced by the Child Death Review Team study. The importance of school as a site for education about which help is sought and problem solving is also clear. I am more than happy to table the rest of the report. I just want to conclude by saying that we within the department recognise our responsibilities to, I guess, ensure that all young people are engaged effectively in school, but also we are very much supportive of the right of parents to choose and the right of home schooling.

Document tabled.

CHAIR: I draw some observations. I note that Commissioner Wood's reports were quoted quite a bit, but at that time social media certainly was not alive to the degree it is now. It is rather ironic that the protection of children internally in schools was the main issue and now we are seeing that in some of our schools, sadly, with social media and bullying that some of our kids are being compromised for their own protection inside the schools and, thus, there have been some very tragic outcomes from that. It is interesting that, in light of that effort to protect our children, because of social media that has been compromised internally within our systems, which is a very sad observation from my side of things.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What are the limitations on a parent accessing distance education for their child?

Mr SMYTH KING: The role of distance education is part of the provision of public schooling in New South Wales. It is a service that is extended to both public schools and the non-government school sector where subject choice cannot be provided by that particular school or where for a range of other reasons—there are many reasons why distance education may be deemed a viable option for a child—

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is precisely those other reasons in which I am interested. The reason I ask the question is that home schooling and distance education have been weighed up against each other in a number of submissions. I am interested to know, for example, is a child with a special need, a child whose parent objects to schooling for some reason or a child for whom accessible public schools is not viable able to access distance education?

Mr SMYTH KING: Parents make a choice about where they enrol and send their kids to school for compulsory schooling. Where a parent chooses not to enrol in a public government school or a non-government school, the options they have is for providing home schooling through registration.

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, Mr Smyth King, I will stop you right there. I want to know when they can get access to distance education. What are the limitations on access to distance education?

Mr LENNOX: I can probably provide some information there. Distance education is there as a provision where other forms of education, for whatever reason, may not be accessible. The provision of distance education for non-government schools is generally on a single-subject basis, and it is on the basis that the non-government school cannot provide access to a particular aspect of the curriculum—for example, to meet the requirements for a Higher School Certificate. So that is available to non-government schools in that sort of situation. For example, in 2014 the department provided in excess of 1,800 single-subject places to non-government schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Sure, but that is not really what I am after. You would be aware of what I am after.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you just give us the criteria? Do you have criteria?

Dr JOHN KAYE: For example, if a parent says, "My kid's being bullied at the local public school. I want to distance educate my child" would that be allowed?

Mr LENNOX: It would not in those circumstances.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Okay. So we have one instance where it is not. A parent lives 350 kilometres away from the nearest public school, would it be allowed then?

Mr LENNOX: It would be.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Okay, so that is one where it is and one where it is not?

Mr LENNOX: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Clearly there is a set of criteria—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Can we just clarify that criteria?

Dr JOHN KAYE: I want to know what is that criteria?

Mr LENNOX: There is a range of them and they are defined in policy. We do not have them in front of us today, but they would include things, for example, such as the one you just identified, where they cannot access a school because of distance.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What about a child with special need? What about a child, for example, with a psychosocial special need, who simply finds classrooms just difficult to be in?

CHAIR: Or depression?

Mr LENNOX: It generally is about where there are barriers to the child accessing education. So in some circumstances, such as those special needs provisions, it would be possible under special circumstances for a child to access distance education.

Dr JOHN KAYE: For example, I live in Bankstown. My son has a psychosocial disorder where he finds it very difficult to go to school. Would I be able to access distance education for my son?

Mr LENNOX: You would be able to apply, my understanding is. I am speaking here as not the owner of the policy with full depth of knowledge of that policy, but what I can say is that in circumstances where they cannot access school for particular reasons like that, they could apply for distance education and the application would be assessed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Could you take on notice that the Committee be provided with the policy or at least the details of when somebody can access distance education and when they cannot? It is relevant to this inquiry because that is one issue raised by those who are home schooling as an alternative.

Mr LENNOX: Yes. I take you to your submission on page 2 where you talk specifically about the special report to Parliament: Keep Them Safe and school connectedness. Can you explain what you mean by a school connectedness?

Mr LENNOX: We are quoting the comments that Commissioner Wood raised. By "connectedness", he means enrolment in school and attending school. I think probably in the broader context also connection to education.

CHAIR: Can I add on to this, because this has come through in some of the representations. Some people who are home schooling would like to connect their children for certain parts of the education process at local schools, for instance the local library or local sporting events. Would the department encourage that or is it discouraged? Given the fact that one of the major themes is socialisation of these children, why would we not encourage an openness to that approach in home schooling?

Mr LENNOX: I guess the current situation is that a student that is enrolled in home schooling is not eligible in those circumstances. If there were to be a proposal to change that, it is a complex area with resourcing implications and a range of other implications.

CHAIR: Tell me what those complex situations are.

Mr LENNOX: The department would look at it, but we would have to take any such suggestion on notice for consideration.

Mr WATERHOUSE: One of the considerations to bear in mind is who individual schools have a duty of care for. If a child simply comes up on a casual basis to use the library or comes up at lunchtime and is not recognised by the teachers and is not understood in terms of their needs at school, that raises duty of care issues. There would be some fairly extensive policy work that would need to be done if we were to move to allowing that, which is not the current practice.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It is an all duck or no dinner circumstance; you are either in or you are out.

CHAIR: In light of that, if you are under the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES] and BOSTES has approved your home schooling, you are in the New South Wales education system, so surely you qualify under that?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But you are not in the system of public education and you are not the responsibility of a teacher in public education.

Mr WATERHOUSE: I guess it is parallel to, yes, if you are enrolled in a non-government school, you are not subject to the duty of care of a Government school if you happen to come in to their premises. There has to be clarity about who has legal responsibilities for caring for children. That is one aspect. There may be others, probably resourcing aspects as well.

CHAIR: It seems crazy that we are talking about getting a better outcome for our kids and this is one avenue we could improve, in my view. Has any work been done on this?

Mr LENNOX: Not to my knowledge.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Would it be a better outcome for a child to turn up anonymously at a school where no teacher knows that child and no teacher has any ongoing record of that child's educational or social performance?

Mr WATERHOUSE: I think it would be very difficult, just from a normal playground point of view. If the children at the playground do not recognise the child and he or she is not in their class and so on, there would be special steps that need to happen to see that they are in some way integrated. I am not sure what the scenario is. If they came in to use the library, that might be one thing, if they were supervised. If it is to be in the playground or be involved in some of the school's activities —

CHAIR: Sports.

Mr WATERHOUSE: Or sports, the thing is, how would you manage? You have got to map out the steps to manage the support and responsibility for the child.

CHAIR: Absolutely, and that would be the onus of the parent to do that at the beginning of the year and to build those relationships, to have that symbiotic relationship, if we are genuinely interested in better outcomes of a child's education.

Mr LENNOX: I was going to add to Michael's comment. Also in enrolment, the principal needs to consider and accommodate any special needs that the child might have, any potential risk that the child's behaviour might have for anyone else on the school's site. So there are a range of issues that the principal needs to consider when enrolling a child in the school, or having somebody else on the site interacting with the students and the teachers.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I take you to page three of your submission, which goes to the issue of connectedness. The second last paragraph states, "Schools provide opportunities for comparative assessment and monitoring of students' learning and wellbeing amongst their cohort." What you are saying is that when a child

is in a school there is a group of professional educators—not one, but many professional educators—including school principals, school leaders, who are monitoring that child, so there are many eyes on that child.

Mr LENNOX: That is correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What you are asserting is that those many eyes are better than a single set of eyes?

Mr LENNOX: What we are asserting is that that occurs within the school. There are all those eyes on the student, making assessments about the student, the student's needs, issues that the student might be having. The point we are making is that in the situation of home schooling, it is important to ensure that the registration and monitoring of that situation is rigorous so that the students are supported, as they should be.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Talk me through the policy difference from education perspective of having one person's eyes on a child for 24/7, effectively, and a group of 70 or 80 teachers and school leaders having their eyes on a thousand children five days a week, six hours a day? What are the benefits of schooling over home schooling?

Mr WATERHOUSE: There is a middle part of that spectrum, which is that in a practical sense, certainly in primary schools, there will be a particular teacher with primary responsibility for a child in their class. There will be perhaps one or two others that the child will engage with during the year, plus the principals and deputy, and so on. Each layer has particular responsibilities, so more responsibility for the classroom teacher. At a high school level, that is variegated somewhat because of the introduction of multiple subject teachers and so on, but, again, often there will be arrangements made that particular teachers, year advisers—or team teaching in the early years—are present so there is some more particular responsibility. It is not all 70 teachers having an equal responsibility for 2,000 kids, whatever it might be—1,000 kids. It is particular responsibilities as well. It is not just one versus 70, if I can put it that way.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Does the Department of Education and Communities have an evidence base that shows the effectiveness of that monitoring?

Mr WATERHOUSE: I am not quite sure what you are asking, the effectiveness in terms of education or responsibility?

Dr JOHN KAYE: A students' learning and wellbeing were the two things that were mentioned in that paragraph. Your submission asserts that the comparative assessment and monitoring creates wellbeing and learning outcomes, or secures wellbeing and education outcomes.

Mr LENNOX: The other aspect of that, as Michael has just outlined, is the gradation of responsibilities within the school. There are also specialists in the school who are able to provide additional support where it might be identified that a child has a particular need. For example, school counsellors are able to provide specialist support. There are learning and support teachers. As well as the gradation in responsibilities, there are also specialists who are able to provide specific support if a child has an identified need or indeed is in need of support.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: And school chaplains.

CHAIR: Can I rebut that assumption?

Dr JOHN KAYE: No. Mr Green. With all due respect, chair, you can ask questions.

CHAIR: I am talking about yours.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I did not make any assumptions. I have asked questions and I am getting answers.

CHAIR: Can I just say, there are students who have suffered from depression and whatever else, and having 1,000 eyes on those kids has not been able to pick up the inner world of those children who have lost hope and taken their lives. Having that many people around students is not a guaranteed outcome that will help them address the issues in their life —

Dr JOHN KAYE: I ask the witnesses to take that as a question.

CHAIR: —whether that is from bullying or social media.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I ask you to take that as a question and give us your response to it.

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes.

Mr WATERHOUSE: I would say, yes, it is not a guarantee.

CHAIR: That is right, it is not, sadly.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can it ever be a guarantee?

Mr WATERHOUSE: I doubt that there can ever be a guarantee, and I doubt that parents looking after their own children can have a guarantee either.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I will briefly go to the issue of learning collectively. Does the Department of Education put a high value on group learning, group activities, learning collectively, children in a classroom jointly coming to an understanding?

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes. The current knowledge that we have about teaching and learning, and growth in childhood and adolescent years is around what is referred to in a broader context as twenty-first century skills of education. It is around young people being able to work collaboratively together, work with others, share ideas, grow from the ideas and the contributions that people have. Schools are a really good place for that to be fostered and developed. When you look at the role young people will have in the future in their adult lives, they will be drawing very much on that range of skills and ability to be problem solvers and work collaboratively within the context of their adult environments that they are in.

CHAIR: The internet and the accessibility of global learning exists and can come into the lounge room of the home schooler as well.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That is not socialisation.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is not collaborative learning.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It is an extraordinarily artificial environment.

CHAIR: It is a route that was not there in the past.

Mr SMYTH KING: They are valuable tools in the way in which we learn and the access we have to information, but at the end of the day you cannot really overcome the power of a group of young people or a group of people sitting in a space together and exploring a problem or a set of issues and learning from each other in that process. Our schools are very much moving in that direction as we go forward with our reforms.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Part of the learning outcome is the skill of collaboratively working and collaboratively solving problems?

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes, and working with other people. It is the whole issue, not only about the intellectual rigour that that provides. It is also about the socialisation and the wellbeing that comes from us being able to do that effectively with others.

Dr JOHN KAYE: We do not measure that anywhere explicitly in our student outcomes, do we?

Mr SMYTH KING: We basically measure, I guess, four proxies of schooling outcome. One is around student performance. We could talk at length about what that might or might not be.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy, higher school certificate, things like that?

Mr SMYTH KING: Yes, those sorts of things. We also very much focus on school engagement and that is strongly reflected in attendance data; how many days a kid goes to school in a year. We have also got other important measures about completion of schooling, which is year 12, or its equivalent. We know students who complete year 12 or its equivalent will be much better positioned in adult life than if they drop out of school earlier. What is developing in this space, particularly in New South Wales, that is important for us are the indicators of wellbeing. There are a range of indicators that are important for us to capture as a system, capture individually within schools and have schools focus on them in a way that we probably have not done before.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I want to ask about the department's role in providing advice and information around home schooling policy. Is there an opportunity for you to feed in issues around home schooling through the Board of Studies or, for that matter, any of the interagency committees that exist?

Mr SMYTH KING: We have a broad range. I will ask Paul to comment a little bit further on the specific details around our relationship in terms of the Board of Studies and how we work in the home schooling space. We work very constantly and increasingly with other Government agent partners and non-government providers, people like The Smith Family and organisations like that around the services we each provide and how they, in a more effective way, come together to support the individual in that journey in growth.

In that space, the issues here are always around the potential for educational neglect, that a young person is growing up during the compulsory years of schooling and they are not effectively engaged in an educational experience, and that becomes the focus of those interagency deliberations that we have, because we clearly have identified—and there has been some high-profile cases around this—where young people have not been known to anybody. They have been identified through, perhaps, a very brief contact with a school, but it is the school's contact that has been very important in uncovering the circumstances that ultimately may well lead to the broader community having a much focused view on whether there is neglect there, and particularly severe neglect in terms of the young person's growth and development.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Perhaps also in answering that, if you could describe any way in which the department is able to identify or assess the quality of the education and the outcomes for those students who are in home schooling?

Mr WATERHOUSE: We would not see it as the role of our department to monitor—

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I know that.

Mr WATERHOUSE: —or evaluate home schoolers. That would be more in the domain of the Board of Studies.

Mr LENNOX: And I think, from my recollection, the department certainly has representation on the board's reference group. I think we have a number of representatives that sit on that group and I think the board's submission might have outlined the levels of representation on that group but I think there are several departmental representatives on the Board of Studies' reference group. I think this may answer question that came up earlier that we have increased in connection with the Board of Studies. One of the issues is around students where registration may have been refused. You would be aware that one of the child protection reforms was chapter 16A of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, which allows for exchange of information between prescribed bodies where there may be safety welfare or wellbeing concerns but also puts an obligation on those bodies to coordinate service for children and young people.

What the board does where they have concerns about a registration and are refusing, they notify us under chapter 16A that they have done so and any concerns that they might have. We pass that information on to our local home school liaison team, who have responsibility for following up attendance issues and they follow up to ensure that the child is in fact enrolled in a school and if not they follow the parent to do that. Generally—not generally but on occasions the child does have an enrolment at a school but there have been some issues that have led to the parent deciding to apply for home schooling. In those circumstances we provide and the home school liaison program provides support at the local level to try to work those through. If we have concerns that may be of a child protection nature, we liaise with our Child Wellbeing Unit and they can support people at the local level to identify services that might support the family, if that is required, or coordinate service with other agencies.

CHAIR: It has been reported that about 56,000 children are at risk who are not being seen by child care officers. How does your agency have interagency feedback of those 56,000 kids because I would imagine that most would be in our schools?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Yes, there is certainly interaction between our department and the Department of Family and Community Services [FACS]. We have a Child Wellbeing Unit, which was established post the Wood inquiry reforms, as a number of agencies do. There is very close liaison between the Child Wellbeing Unit and FACS on whether people have reached that threshold but I think you are referring to risk of significant harm, which is the mandatory reporting requirement. We liaise with FACS on how we can continue to provide the services while the case is assessed or whether we should be connecting them with other family referral services or other local agencies, government or non-government, that may be able to assist the child or health agencies, et cetera so, yes, there is a close process of liaison.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: We heard earlier from a representative of BOSTES that there is no formalised consultation process with those with children in home schooling such as a consultative committee. Are you aware that that is the situation?

Mr SMYTH KING: Can you elaborate on the question a little bit further for me?

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Okay. There is a suggestion that there may have been a lack of consultation between parents of those with children in home schooling and BOSTES. The BOSTES representative told us that there is no consultative committee representative of those parents. Are you aware that that is situation?

Mr SMYTH KING: No, I am not aware.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Do you have responsibility for BOSTES? Do you have an oversight of them at all?

Mr WATERHOUSE: BOSTES is a separate agency reporting separately to the Minister.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: But representing the Department of Education and Communities do you believe that there should be a consultative process?

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I do not know if that is an appropriate question for these gentlemen to answer.

Mr SMYTH KING: I would need to consider the detail of the purpose and the reasons for that particular structure to be put in place because I am not sure what the function of it would be in relation to the provision of public schooling or public education and the role that BOSTES has as a statutory authority.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Do you have any oversight in regard to those students who are in home schooling?

Mr WATERHOUSE: If they are registered to home schooling we do not have any involvement with or oversight of them. If they are not registered or not enrolled at all, our role is to make sure that they are registered or are enrolled.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Through your enforcement role of the truancy laws?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Correct.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You would not, therefore, see any need for there to be a consultative process between your department and parents of those in home schooling?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Probably little need in relation to our department but it is a question really for the Board of Studies as to whether they would see a purpose relating to their regulatory role.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Following on from a question asked earlier by Dr Kaye about distance education, would you also be able to provide us with details of the postcodes of students who are

enrolled in distance education and the numbers? It would be interesting to see, for example, how many students and from which postcodes?

Mr SMYTH KING: We will seek to do that but I cannot guarantee that it will be readily available. The system could actually generate that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: If not that, perhaps something that gives an indication of the number of students engaged in distance education and some means of their geographic distribution?

Mr SMYTH KING: We will seek to do that. I will take it on notice.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The New South Wales Office of Better Regulation has a lot of guidelines about how you review regulation, consult with stakeholders and things like that. When the education department updates or changes regulation do you go through that process?

Mr WATERHOUSE: We do. The two main pieces of legislation that we would have that have regulations are the Education Act and the Teaching Service Act. The Education Act does have a regulation but it does not, from my recollection, have any bearing on compulsory schooling, although it does have some aspect in relation to the school leaving age question in terms of definitions of what counts as compliance after year 10. It does not directly bear on the question of enforcement of compulsory attendance or enrolment issues, or compulsory education, if I can put that in a more general sense.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you pin down a bit more for me the legislative instruments that make it compulsory to attend school?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Yes. The Education Act is the primary piece of legislation and section 22 of that Act says it is the duty of the parent of a child of compulsory school age to cause the child either to be enrolled and attend a government school or a registered non-government school or to be registered for home schooling by the board. If you do one or other of those you are compliant with the compulsory school age requirements.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So there are no regulations associated with that?

Mr WATERHOUSE: If I can just have a look at the regulations, the only aspect of the regulations that is relevant to that is in relation to participation in paid work and completion of year 10, which are elements of the definition of compulsory school age, so compulsory school age in a very broad sense is from six to 17. After a child has completed year 10, which has a particular definition in the regulation, they can leave school so long as they are either engaged in further education or in employment or a combination of those until they are aged 17 or remain at school, so basically six to 17 is the broad compulsory school age.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Your agency is responsible for enforcing that law?

Mr WATERHOUSE: That is right, yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is it a difficult task given, for example, many young people are not in your school system; they might be in the non-government school system or they might be in home schooling.

Mr WATERHOUSE: It is a difficult task, not necessarily for those reasons. We do have a responsibility of enforcement in relation to all children of compulsory school age whether they are in the government school system or not, and we have taken a number of legal actions, but I would say a small number, in relation to non-attendance at non-government schools and, as Mr Smyth King outlined earlier, we have also taken a small number of legal actions in relation to students who have not enrolled at all, so not enrolled and not registered for home schooling, so not compliant in any way with the Act.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What I am driving at is you have inherited this responsibility for historic reasons, given that in the past the education department was responsible for curriculum, home schooling and regulation of non-government schools. Many of those functions in the eighties were taken out and given to a statutory authority, being the Board of Studies, but that responsibility for enforcing compulsory schooling was retained by the department.

Mr WATERHOUSE: Correct.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Should that responsibility be given to the Board of Studies, given that the Board of Studies is the one who is positioned to oversight and registers all those systems?

Mr WATERHOUSE: That is really a policy question that I do not have a view about.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I suppose logistically in enforcing those regulations—

Mr WATERHOUSE: I do not think the logistics—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: —you need to identify students who are in systems not operated by you and you do not have their—

Mr WATERHOUSE: From my perspective, it is very important in relation to the successful enforcement of attendance and enrolment that there is a close liaison between home school liaison officers who are within the department and the legal officers or external lawyers who are dealing with the cases. There are two kinds of cases. One is in the Children's Court where there is a conferencing kind of model where a magistrate can order that there is a compulsory conference akin to what happens under the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, so that the parents are brought together and various players who may seek to get the engagement happening and then if there is an agreement there, that can go away and the court can register it and there is a compulsory schooling order made that there is no penalty for parents if they have agreed to that in the conference.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So compliance with a court order?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Yes, and then if there is failure to comply, then there is a prosecution and the general law in relation to the prosecution is that any public official can raise a prosecution in the Local Court—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But usually it will be a parent who has complained to you?

Mr WATERHOUSE: —so there is nothing preventing the Board of Studies doing so at the moment and there is nothing preventing, for example, the police from doing so but the practical matter is that we do so because we follow the cases all the way through and the lion's share of cases are cases within our system.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: This question is probably directed to Mr Lennox and Mr Smyth King. Are you aware of a series of reports known as Writing Themselves In?

Mr LENNOX: I am not, no.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: They are a series of studies that looked at same-sex attracted and gender questioning children and included in those reports was an assessment that children were probably more likely to seek support and help from teachers and fellow students than from parents as to their sexuality. If you accept that that is the case in those reports, can you think of other circumstances where students/children are more likely to make disclosures or seek assistance from teachers or fellow students rather than parents? It is sort of related to this connectedness issue?

Mr SMYTH KING: It is a very complex set of issues that I guess shift all the time. I think it was raised earlier about the changing face of social media and its impact on young people, and how what once was probably a very visible thing for most of us is now often very invisible and we do not know what is going on. It is the roles that schools have been increasingly playing in this space that is really important for us around having a safe, secure environment in which a young person feels supported to actually disclose whatever it might be now. In the child protection space sometimes that disclosure is often about what is happening at home. It is really important that a young person does not feel that they are going to be judged unfairly or adversely by the disclosure that they want.

What we are trying to build is very much a schooling system which offers safe places for young people. Schools are very safe places by and large for young people already but we want to extend that. It is the whole issue of us grappling and dealing as a society in the role schools play with this whole emerging issue of the way

young people socialise with each other and I guess seek the support of older people or support in terms of what issues they may be facing. Teachers play a very important role in that place for many young people.

CHAIR: Mr Smyth King has just said, "by and large". Mr Lennox, can you provide the Committee with statistics on how many complaints you receive a year and what type of complaints they fall in—abuse, bullying, violence? Can you give the Committee a breakdown of what has been happening in our public schools over the past four years?

Mr LENNOX: The sorts of statistics available around that are largely statistics on suspension.

CHAIR: There are no statistical breakdowns on whether students have been abused, bullied or subjected to violence?

Mr LENNOX: One of the issues with bullying is that it is very difficult to actually define what bullying is and get a commonly accepted definition of what it is, and because of that it is not something that statistics are kept on. Probably the measures that are publicly available are the things around suspension and expulsion, which are published annually.

CHAIR: Can the Committee get those statistics?

Mr LENNOX: Yes, they are published annually.

CHAIR: We would also like statistics on complaints against teachers as well.

Mr LENNOX: I do not think complaints against a teacher falls into our area. I am not sure what is available in regard to that.

Mr WATERHOUSE: There are some statistics published in terms of allegations about teachers that are dealt with by the Employee Performance and Conduct Unit.

CHAIR: I appreciate that it gets tricky but if you have a statistical breakdown of complaint handling in New South Wales schools the Committee would like to see that.

Mr WATERHOUSE: We do have a complaints policy but I do not know if we organise our statistics under a general heading of complaints. We could put together an amalgam of issues relating to things like suspensions and related kinds of student welfare aspects, which is easily available to the Committee from our website.

Mr LENNOX: Serious incidents reports.

CHAIR: Anything that will give the Committee a snapshot.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Does equivalent data exist for non-government schools?

Mr WATERHOUSE: I am not aware of it being published by any agency. Individual schools may publish it.

CHAIR: I am happy for it to be all schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I always struggle with the kind of data you are about to produce because it inherently points the finger at public schools which are more open and accountable.

CHAIR: I am interested in whatever your portfolio covers.

Dr JOHN KAYE: If you do have access to data for non-government schools could you provide that as well?

Mr WATERHOUSE: We will have a look at whether we do. I am not sure.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How are you enforcing compulsory schooling in relation to home schooling and have you ever taken any actions in relation to that?

Mr WATERHOUSE: It depends on what you mean in relation to home schooling. If someone is—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Registered.

Mr LENNOX: —registered for home schooling there is no reason to take action.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But how are you enforcing it? They might be registered but it might not be happening.

Mr WATERHOUSE: That is a question for the Board of Studies as to its monitoring.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: No, I am asking you because you are responsible for compulsory schooling.

Mr WATERHOUSE: A person who is registered by the Board of Studies as a home schooler is meeting their compulsory schooling obligation.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How do you know?

Mr WATERHOUSE: That is by definition. One of the two elements of the definition I read out under section 22 is that you are either enrolled and attend a government school or you are registered as a home schooler. If you are registered you are compliant with the Act. We do not go behind that in terms of regulation.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The regulation assumes that you are being educated. There is no way of questioning whether or not you are being educated?

Mr WATERHOUSE: From a regulatory point of view, no. But the way of examining it is that the Board of Studies has a responsibility of determining whether they should or should not be registered under its criteria.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So you would rely on the Board of Studies to deregister them if the board felt they were not being educated? Is that how it would work?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Correct.

Mr LENNOX: As I indicated earlier, if the board indicates that it has refused registration then we follow that up at the local level with our home school liaison team to make sure—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you taken action in those cases?

Mr LENNOX: I indicated earlier that there are some matters in which we have taken action.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you take that question on notice and get back to us with the details?

Mr WATERHOUSE: In 2013, 79 matters and in 2014, 54 matters have been referred to home school liaison officers. Of those, in 2013 six were referred to the Children's Court in relation to the process I outlined earlier and four in 2014 so far. Of those going to the Local Court, two have gone to the Local Court and four in the current year have gone to the Local Court—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But are those cases registered for home schooling?

Mr WATERHOUSE: Those are cases of people who are not meeting the compulsory schooling requirements. So they are not registered for home schooling, they are not enrolled.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am only interested in the subset registered for home schooling. They are the statistics I am asking you about.

Mr WATERHOUSE: There are no people who are registered for home schooling who are prosecuted or taken to the court because they are meeting the requirements of compulsory schooling.

CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. I remind you that you have 21 days to answer any questions taken on notice. I also thank the department for the great work it is doing in our schools.

(The witnesses withdrew)

GLENDA JACKSON, Director, Australian Home Education Advisory Service, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Ms Jackson, would you like to make an opening statement?

Dr JACKSON: I have two papers for each Committee member. One of those papers I co-authored with Dr Sonia Allan, who did most of the work. The first paper is probably the most relevant to the Committee. We undertook a comprehensive review of all legislation in Australia and compared it with home education research—basically it was compared with Australian research and how it either lined up or there were discrepancies between what we know from the research and what we know from the home educator experiences. I wrote the other paper—it is one of the sections of my thesis—and it looks at professional experiences with home-educated students. When I did my original doctoral research I was very interested in student experiences as home-educated students and their views as they experienced the transition between home and school. I did that because these students were in a position that most people are not—namely, of being able to view two educational cultures and express their opinions and show their experiences. I thought that was something that was very lacking in research and because they are the end product of home education something that was really important.

In the process of doing that research I interviewed parents and I also interviewed 17 professionals. The reason for presenting the Committee with the paper on the views and experiences of professionals is to show that generally speaking the professionals who have interacted with home-educated students found that they were both academically on par, if not above, and that socially they were usually capable and fitted in well—there were some qualifications to that and I have included those in the paper. At the moment home education is being looked at and because of its intersection with professionals this kind of information is valuable to help the Committee understand what professionals understand about home education and what they do not understand. Some of those differences have contributed to some of the tensions that exist at the moment between the home educating community and professionals. I am not sure how much you want me to go on?

CHAIR: That is sufficient. We will now commence with questions. In the second last paragraph of your paper you say, "Wise governance will encourage every alternative pathway that opens doors for its young people to achieve positive, successful and meaningful lives." Would you like to elaborate on that comment in relation to home schooling?

Dr JACKSON: That paper was written under my advisory cap and the reason for writing it was because every week or two I receive a request from a family—New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria or South Australia it does not matter—where parents are at their wits end, their children are not coping in the school system and they want to find some alternative. Many of them do not take up the home education option mostly because they do not know enough about it and they do not know how it is supported. In places where the registration process is quite onerous it is very difficult, especially when the parents are thrown into this and they did not intend that in the first place. I did send round the summary of Australian Home Education research because that shows the Committee what research is available but there was a paper and a thesis done by Emma Stroobant in New Zealand.

She was a home schooled student after being a chronic school refuser and she was interested in how it changed people's perspective. She looked at at least seven students and compared them with professional opinions. Her paper is very telling. What she did show was that the home education experience suddenly took away from the children the reason for resistance. When parents backed off and let the children settle into a learning routine every one of the students she studied made it to university. I am not saying or suggesting that is going to happen across the board. The fact that those students had another option to learning education was very important.

I have also just recently read research in Japan on the same thing where they have a major school refusal problem and the researcher had looked at the home education option. A few of the students found it difficult because they were not used to self-monitoring but many of the students found the home education option gave them an alternative. Where the problem came in Japan was that society, the school community and the people they associated with, had such a negative idea about home education they were afraid to meet people and that dissonance created social isolation that did not need to be there.

CHAIR: We have heard from previous witnesses in terms of the collaborative learning and one of the things that could be missing from home schooling opportunities is the collaborative learning process. What does your research show in respect of that?

Dr JACKSON: It is difficult to find schools that do collaborate with home schoolers. I did find two or three. Most of often they are in or out.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You misunderstood the question.

CHAIR: Within schools they are using the model of collaborative learning and there is a thought that maybe that opportunity does not exist within home schooling.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That might be overstating it.

CHAIR: Well, help me.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: It is less available in terms of home schooling. Do you have any research that addresses that point?

Dr JACKSON: A little, it was very restrictive. A mother at one State primary school in country Victoria decided to remove her children from school—this is how small the sample groups are. The senior principal, instead of saying "no" said, "Okay, let us do this, how about you bring them to art classes and social activities". He had the children back in school within two years. The whole experience had opened up the minds of the teachers as to how they could better collaborate with home educators. Not all home educators are going to choose to come back into the system. I know of another family that wanted to work with the school but the only collaboration that seemed to fit for their gifted children—and they were gifted by school assessment not by parent assessment—was recess time. That was valuable for a while but it needed to be something more. It is an area that really does need more research. It is one that seems to have a lot of potential.

CHAIR: I note in your submission some examples of children with Asperger's, ADHD, motor dysphasia and other issues of anxiety, fear, depression and anxiety. You go further in your comments to say that home educators have expressed their frustrations with professional responses to significant problems faced by their children. Is it that the professional outcomes do not match the reality of grass roots at home?

Dr JACKSON: I will give you a couple of examples. I had one family who had a year-two student who had been medically assessed with night-time epilepsy. He would be very tired by the time he went to school. They went to the school councillor and the school councillor totally supported them and tried to negotiate between the family and the classroom teacher to sort out a suitable program. For some reason the classroom teacher insisted that because he was not finishing the set classwork that he should take it home for homework and he was becoming more and more stressed. I met that little boy in their home and he was so happy to be out of school because of the pressure and tension. Not all professionals are on the same page. I think that is really important to acknowledge. There can be very supportive professionals within the school who are not the classroom teachers but the message does not get through. That is one example.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Dr Jackson, thank you for the large volume of evidence that you provided to the Committee. To locate your evidence, can you tell us what your PhD thesis was called?

Dr JACKSON: The title I chose was a statement from a home educated student that said, "More than one way to learn."

Dr JOHN KAYE: *"More than One Way to Learn": Home Educated Students' Transitions Between Home and School.*

Dr JACKSON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is fair to say your PhD thesis came from a perspective of highly sympathetic to home schooling?

Dr JACKSON: I home educated my children, so in that sense, yes, I do understand home education.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You now make a living by providing—

Dr JACKSON: No, I do not make a living by it, but I do offer a service.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Which is a fee for service?

Dr JACKSON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You make part of your living—

Dr JACKSON: I also work in schools as a secondary teacher. I am on both sides of the page.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I will take you to a statement you make in your submission numbered 141. You accuse senior educational professionals of "...a level of uninformed professional paranoia about home education...". It is a fairly strong statement to say that the vast majority of senior educational professionals in Australia are guilty of "uninformed professional paranoia"?

Dr JACKSON: I did not make it as a general statement about all professionals. As you read through the professional paper—that is why I produced it—I consulted with lecturers at university who are well aware of my work, what has been involved and the stories behind it. They agreed with that summation and said, "Definitely put it in." My evidence for that is that when I went through the comments of the 17 professionals I was able to find who had interacted with home education across the board and it was very obvious that most of them had no idea where they had come from, what their schooling experience was beforehand or whether they had been in school. They heard the words "home education" and that stuck and when they left they did not know what the end results were. That was very obvious across all of those professionals.

One or two of them did know where one or two of their students had gone. For example, one of my year-seven teachers had a student come in and he said to me he was an example of someone who was homed but not schooled. I was given enough information to work out who the child was and I went and interviewed the family and discovered that at year seven this student, by the time of interview, was already in about year 10. At the time of interview this child had had nine months in year-one and maybe six months in year-four because of learning differences with a variety of State schools that he had attended. The label his problem was given was home education, not the fact that he had learning differences. That came out in other studies. It was also comments made by primary principals that when they looked at the children who had come in the problems were not about home education they were fact that these children had learning differences. Some of the other teachers did not necessarily stop to put the word "home education" to the side and look at the fact that there were learning differences that needed to be addressed.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can you comment for the Committee on the differences in styles between "home schooling" and "unschooling"? I think you or some other witness described it as the classroom in the home.

Dr JACKSON: We will start with the classroom in the home. Many home educators start off that way and they find it does not work. Just recently I helped supervise a masters research project that surveyed 55 teachers who had chosen to home educate. These are people who know how the system works and what happens. They found that trying to translate classroom practices into the home did not work and they had to loosen up their programs and make it more interactive with their students over time. The one exception was a family where the mother was forced into home education because the children were not fitting into a country school. She did not have any other option but to take them out and she was planning at the earliest convenience to get them back into school. What my research and all the other research finds is that home educating families where the mother tries to maintain the school room look become fatigued.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are saying that the schoolroom in the home is a transitory phase that these homes go through?

Dr JACKSON: Generally speaking, yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Within the settled model of home education there are a range of different styles?

Dr JACKSON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Take us to "unschooling"?

Dr JACKSON: From my observations of unschooling and I did have two or three families who were unschooling and they did it very successfully. They did it very successfully with gifted children and with children with significant learning difficulties. One brother was finishing a PhD before me and he had started after me. He was 21 when I met him. That is one illustration. He had a brother who had barely learnt to read by 14—

Dr JOHN KAYE: I want you to describe to the Committee what unschooling is?

Dr JACKSON: Unschooling is where the family will live its daily life and a child will express interest in a particular thing and parents will provide a background of resources that fit that interest. They will go shopping and explain how money works. They will explain if you want to build a garden you have to put a fence around it, how many pickets do we need to go around and how much will that cost. It is making learning happen in their family lives.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I do not understand, because every family does that anyway, what is different with this?

Dr JOHN KAYE: There is no school that goes with it. I understand, Dr Jackson, there is no structured learning involved, is that correct?

CHAIR: There is no structured timetable, everything is an experience and learning.

Dr JACKSON: No. Alan Thomas has done the research on this and he is about to produce a book early next year on informal learning. I spoke to the mother of one family who had diarised every learning experience of her child from year nought through to year seven and when Alan Thomas went through and deciphered what that child had learned when she tried school in year-seven her maths was up to par with her peers.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: You will have difficulty convincing me that you will do the HSC [Higher School Certificate] on that model.

Dr JACKSON: It does not stop there. When students get to year seven and into high school, they tend to say I am interested in such-and-such, I will do an open university course at whatever in this topic. This is how the students are getting in.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you have any concerns that that model is not teaching children to develop their own internal disciplines?

Dr JACKSON: What do you mean by "internal disciplines"?

Dr JOHN KAYE: There are many things we do in life that we do not want to do.

CHAIR: Pay tax.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And there are many intellectual struggles we undertake that we would prefer not to but we take them on because we know we have to, it is part of being an adult. We learn that inner strength by being forced to, for example, learn Latin. I personally loathed learning Latin, but I did it for five years. I am not proposing that as an educational outcome. The reality is that there are intellectual disciplines we are put through that are not of our own making which make us stronger people and teach us how to face up to intellectual challenges. Are you concerned that unschooled children do not have that?

Dr JACKSON: No, not generally speaking. Not in homes—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Where do they get that capacity to face up to difficult challenges?

Dr JACKSON: You have raised a very interesting point because of one of the things that came out of my study that I really did not expect. When I interviewed the students I was trying to tease out their views and experiences of learning at home and learning at school. The one thing that came out as the number one

appreciated value was their ability to make decisions that had meaning and place in their lives. That was whether they were unschooled or whether they were eclectically taught. The ones who struggled with it were the ones who had school at home. Autonomy, the ability to make decisions that counted, was something they experienced at home at the highest level.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I do not know whether that is responsive to the proposition.

Dr JACKSON: It means that these students when they make a decision learn about responsibility. They know that when they make decisions it counts. When the students went to school they really struggled with that. They really struggled with all of a sudden someone else is making decisions that I am capable of making.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: No, somebody is putting a set of structures around them that they are not used to. Is that not the interpretation that one is entitled to draw?

Dr JACKSON: Yes, they did recognise they were structures but in a democratic society we want our young people to be able to make decisions and stand on their own two feet. These students actually experienced that.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That is a concept of libertarianism that does not apply in our society.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is the opposite of the question that Dr Kaye is asking you.

CHAIR: We will move on to questions from the Hon. Adam Searle.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I start from the position of being a little bit sceptical about the notion of home schooling. I had some exposure to it growing up and have seen people in my extended community who have engaged in home schooling at different times. I have read your various submissions. There seem to be some recurring themes which are expressed at a level of abstraction. I am trying to get a handle on the contours of the issue. For example, you cite in a number of places that there are a number of reasons for home schooling. One is negative impacts of traditional structured learning in schools and on the other hand is the positives of home schooling. I have not detected in any of the submissions any kind of hard data. In those articles you cite are there any statistics about what percentage falls into which category as to the motivations for home schooling?

Dr JACKSON: It is about 50:50. From the Queensland research if you look up—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Sorry, 50:50 what?

Dr JACKSON: Negative and positive reasons for home schooling.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Negative in the sense of not being satisfied with what the school system has to offer and on the other hand an attraction to—

Dr JACKSON: Yes, a philosophical or whatever reason for wanting to home educate. It is about 50:50. I would have got those figures from Jeffrey and Giskes and the Education Queensland thing.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I think you cite in one of your papers that the Australian experience is not the same as the American experience. For example, here the motivation for home schooling is much less inspired by religion or philosophy. Is that your view?

Dr JACKSON: That is the consensus of a few researchers, including myself. When we read the American literature it does not resonate with what we are finding here.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: What are you finding here in terms of hard data?

Dr JACKSON: The hard data is that in my research there were 28 parents. I think 24 of those did have a religious connection. But when we went through the reasons for them home educating some of them had negative experiences in schools and some of them wanted the best for their children.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I am sure all of them wanted the best for their children.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I think every parent wants the best for their child.

Dr JACKSON: That is the usual reason in Australia that we are finding across all of the research. Parents are wanting something that they feel their children are not getting through the mainstream schools.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: When you say they are not getting something they want from the school system, in some of the submissions we have learnt of parents of children who have struggled whether with dyslexia or other learning issues that the school system has apparently not been able to cater for or in other cases there was bullying or other unsatisfactory aspects. Are we able to break it down further beyond the level of abstraction with which you have expressed this to some hard data? Twenty-eight parents seems a fairly small cohort to base too much on.

Dr JACKSON: That is the problem with all of the Australian research. We are not able to do a qualitative study.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Home schooling has been in place in this State legally for 24 years. You are saying the research and the literature is really poor in terms of getting a meaningful, longitudinal picture.

Dr JACKSON: Getting quantitative research, yes. If you want quantitative research it is very poor.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: You would agree, would you not, that if people are going to be allowed to significantly opt out of the education system and educate their children as they see fit with, as I understand it, fairly minimal supervision by the State there really should be some research to see what is happening? Do you not agree?

Dr JACKSON: Yes, that would be helpful but my comment about how you would go about that, I do have concerns about the use of something like the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy [NAPLAN], for example. As a teacher educator I go and visit various both private and State schools in Victoria often at the time when NAPLAN tests are coming out and I know that students who have learning disabilities are encouraged not to be around on the day of the NAPLAN tests.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Encouraged by whom?

Dr JACKSON: By the schools.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Really?

Dr JACKSON: Unfortunately, it happens, yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you have evidence of that?

Dr JACKSON: Yes, I do. I have seen it happen. If you were to put in place NAPLAN testing on home educators then the same principles have to apply. If the child has learning difficulties then the way it is assessed needs to be different.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: As I understand it, the NAPLAN tests are meant to be a diagnostic tool in educational terms. It is not meant to be a test to be used to rank schools, although I know that is sometimes what it is used for. What I am saying is it was designed to be a diagnostic tool to see in a snapshot on a given day where a student is up to.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Where a student is up to or where a school is up to?

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: You do get your individual child's NAPLAN results. At the very least it is meant to assist to know where a school student is up to. That would be very useful for a parent to understand their child's capabilities at a given time.

Dr JACKSON: How is it going to be interpreted? Is it going to be understood that the parent took that child out for learning difficulties in the first place? If about 50 per cent of home schooling parents, from what we can assess, are taking them out for problems with some aspect of schooling—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: But that does not translate to a learning difficulty.

Dr JACKSON: Many of them are learning difficulties.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: That might be right but you cannot say that 50 per cent can be discounted in a sense. On what you have said, 50 per cent have a negative view about the school. That could be a variety of things, and you have rightly identified bullying as one of them. That does not translate necessarily into a learning difficulty. I think you are becoming overly defensive in that regard.

CHAIR: The witness is allowed to give her expert view.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: If you think that the NAPLAN is not the appropriate tool for assessment to give the government guidance about the quality of education for students that are being home schooled then what is?

Dr JACKSON: I do not believe that it will explain the quality of education because these children— and I know that many of them are, I have had interactions with them—are at home to learn. All 40 of the students in my study, even though two or three of them hated home schooling, acknowledged that they learnt better at home than they did at school. But if they are having problems at school with learning and that comes out in the test, is that equated with poor home schooling or is it equated with this child having difficulties?

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Do you think that government has a responsibility to monitor any education programs? Given that education is compulsory in this State for children within an age bracket do you not think that government has a responsibility to monitor the quality of those education programs?

Dr JACKSON: Yes, I do.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: Then how do we do that?

Dr JACKSON: Perhaps coming back to understanding the reason why the parent removed the child or has home educated the child in the first place. Perhaps having a professional assessment of their learning problems, which is more telling than just saying these are the reasons. We should actually find out why their child is being home schooled. If they are having learning difficulties that should be assessed and then we should make sure that the parents have the resources to fulfil those needs.

I know that there were home schooling parents who had even tried special schools and the principals of the schools had told them to try home schooling because we are not getting through. Those children as young adults told me that even though there were aspects of home schooling they did not like they did learn better at home. That is my dilemma with seeing NAPLAN being imposed across. There are many home schooling families who would be very happy to have NAPLAN and it is not accessible to them very easily.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: I asked witnesses from the Board of Studies about the range of special needs that children may have and there does not seem to be any exclusion. A child with a severe intellectual disability or with sensory disabilities such as deafness and blindness could be home schooled. Do you think that would be appropriate if the home schooler does not have qualifications in the area of special education?

Dr JACKSON: There has been research done on that twice now. In Western Australia Lucy Riley did a very comprehensive study of that and she found across the board that her families were better off. The children were learning better, the families were happier and the children learnt to integrate into society better by doing home education than when the families were trying to work with the school system. Many of those families were trying to find part-time arrangements. Some of them worked, some of them did not. Her work is very worth checking out.

There has also been a recent study by McDonald that I have just become aware of so I have not read it. I do not know her work. She actually looked at distance education. She just finished her PhD in 2010. I only

became aware of her work when she wrote a journal article and then I checked back on her work and discovered she had done a PhD. Lucy Riley's title was "Progressive Modification". It was because parents could much more quickly respond to what children were learning and they were able to increase or decrease or emphasise different things that they were struggling with. They could change the program to meet the needs of the child. Those children were happier, they were learning better and they were actually being integrated into not school society but to the bigger community.

The Hon. HELEN WESTWOOD: As someone who is clearly supportive of home schooling do you believe there is a particular jurisdiction that is doing it well? Not just in Australia, is there somewhere internationally that you think is a model that we could look at in New South Wales?

Dr JACKSON: The paper that I have asked to be handed out to you that is authored mostly by Sonia Allan—and I have her permission to give it to you—goes through that. I do not want to make a decision about what the best regulation is. I can see that there are pros and cons in all of them. The Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council [THEAC] example is probably one that legislators would feel more comfortable with. My one comment from feedback I have had is that the people who operate it need to be very informed about home education practice and understand the way the home education community works.

As we have seen, 55 teachers who knew the system of how schooling worked found that it just does not work in the home situation.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Would it be fair to say that those parents who use unschooling for children are doing so because of some mental or physical disability of a child and that is why they are using that approach?

Dr JACKSON: The families that I have had—

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: A special need?

Dr JACKSON: —yes, who were special need, was more in the line of gifted. It was more the gifted children where families were unschooling. That is why it was working so well. The people in my research who were unschooling had gifted children. One family did have children with significant, but their mother was a learning disability teacher.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Are you saying it actually is the opposite: These children are so gifted that you cannot put them in a cocoon, you cannot put them in a controlled situation, you have to have a more open system?

Dr JACKSON: Yes, that was my experience.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: So there would be children in that situation. Would there be any children with special needs?

Dr JACKSON: Yes. There were both.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Those two groups together would comprise the majority of children in unschooling?

Dr JACKSON: I would not like to even hazard a guess at that. That is who we know are—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Because there is no data, is there?

Dr JACKSON: There is no quantitative data. We do not have actual numbers.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: No actual data?

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Yes. Could that be the case?

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: In fact.

Dr JACKSON: Well it would appear that way.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Could it be the case on what you know and have observed?

Dr JACKSON: Of the children whose parents were concerned about suicide, four out of them were Asperger's or gifted by school assessment, not by parent assessment, who were on that suicide "We want to make sure that doesn't happen. We want to open up the opportunities for them."

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming today. It has been quite intense with many questions. We thank you for your effort for flying in. If you have taken any questions on notice, or if some questions might be forwarded to you from the Committee after today, you have 21 days to provide the answers. The secretariat will be glad to help you out if that is the case. Thank you once again for providing a submission and being part of this inquiry.

Dr JACKSON: Just one thing, with the quantitative data, I have not published that paper yet. So I am not really at liberty to provide it because it has been signed up already to be published in a handbook on home education around the world.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Do you know when that will be published?

Dr JACKSON: Next year.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It is a matter for you.

(Luncheon adjournment)

TAMARA KIDD, home school parent, and

KAREN CHEGWIDDEN, home school parent, and

DR VIEIRA, former home schooled student, and

MS VIEIRA, home school parent, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Good afternoon. Does anyone want to make an opening statement?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: We have probably all got one.

CHAIR: Please keep them to five minutes per person.

Ms VIEIRA: Good afternoon, honourable members. The Education Act states that parents are the principal educators of their children. When parents choose to send them to school, the school is accountable to the parent for the education of their children. Therefore, sufficient paperwork must be done to demonstrate that their children are receiving the education that their parents sent them to school to receive. However, when parents accept the responsibility of educating their children themselves, it stands to reason they should not need to do that volume of paperwork. The current paperwork requirements clarified by the 2013 information pack took me in excess of 200 hours preparation time last year. I have been home schooling for 22 years, so I am used to doing it. None of this added to the quality of the educational program I was going to deliver.

Of course, schools also report to the Government, because we have to ensure that none of our children are experiencing educational neglect and to ensure that all students are adequately prepared to be useful members of society. However, adherence to the current New South Wales syllabus is not the only way to receive a quality education. Our graduated students and those of other systems, such as the International Baccalaureate, are proof that other systems work and do not disadvantage the children. Parents are quite capable of delivering a quality education without the need for imposing the New South Wales syllabus as the means. What parents need is helpful advice, resources and support. Most of these are accessed through other home schoolers.

I have 10 children. All have been or still are home schooled. Three of my children hold degrees. One holds two advanced diplomas, one a Certificate III and a diploma, two are qualified tradesmen, one is currently at university and the other two are still being home schooled. They transitioned from home schooling to work and study as independent and self-motivated learners and good workers who are comfortable relating to all ages. However, in order to ensure that our students are not being discriminated against compared to children attending school and to ensure a quality education for our children, we need access to educational opportunities, like distance education and T-Vet courses. At the present time, none of our children are permitted to access subjects through the State's distance education, although all schoolchildren are. Also, since raising the school leaving age and the introduction of T-Vet courses in schools, our students no longer have a pathway to apprenticeships.

We also request our students receive the same advantage of fare concessions and to be eligible for the family tax benefit or youth allowance for 16- to 18-year-olds. Although students in schools qualify to receive these, our children do not because the directive states that full-time study must be aimed at and be able to be accredited towards the final qualification for high school in that State. Home schoolers do not have access to the higher school certificate [HSC]. However, we regularly provide alternative pathways for our students. These need to be recognised as an equivalent to HSC study.

In light of this, we would ask the following. First, that you return home schoolers to an adherence only to the minimum curriculum guidelines as outlined in the original Education Reform Act 1990, rather than requiring the New South Wales syllabus, and allow us to develop programs that are suitable for ourselves and our children. Secondly, we ask that any administration of home schooling should be assigned only to people who understand, are sympathetic towards and have experience with home schooling. Thirdly, we ask that our children be allowed the same advantages of access to distance learning, T-Vet courses and insurance cover for work experience, for example, that children enrolled in school are able to use. Fourthly, we ask that registered home schooling be deemed sufficient for the provision of the family tax benefit or youth allowance for our 16- to 18-year-old students as it is to those in schools. Thank you for considering these thoughts.

CHAIR: Are there any other statements? Dr Vieira.

Dr VIEIRA: Honourable members I have been asked to speak today in my capacity as a former home schooled student. All my secondary education was undertaken at home under the supervision of my parents. Following high school, I studied medicine at the University of Newcastle, graduating with honours and the University Medal. Since 2007 I have continued to study and work as a doctor. I am currently completing my fellowship in general practice. My husband and I have three beautiful little girls whom we intend to home school. I am grateful for the opportunity to address the Select Committee today as I believe the future of home schooling in this country is vital to the delivery of diverse and quality education for our children. The State not only has the right but also the responsibility to ensure that its citizens are appropriately educated, which is why I welcome the interest of the current Government and this Committee in home schooling.

I believe the primary purpose of education is to enable the student to recognise truth, goodness and beauty and, by this means, to allow them to make a positive contribution to the civic, economic and social spheres of the society in which they live. For those parents who are willing and able to do it well, home schooling their children provides three major advantages. First, parents, as the first and primary educators of their children, are able to ensure their children are educated in a way that reflects their academic and moral priorities. Secondly, the family is emphasised as the fundamental building block of society, so rather than fragmenting and compartmentalising the lives of individual members, the home schooling family works together to achieve common aims, thus strengthening the relationships. Thirdly, children can be educated in a way that suits their particular learning styles, abilities and natural interests. Parents know their children well and are able to tailor their education to help them pursue excellence in the areas that they are interested in.

Regarding the transition from home schooling to work or further studies, I believe that home schooled students have a distinctive advantage over their traditionally schooled counterparts. Home schooling requires students to interact with peers and adults across a range of ages compared with the quite narrow year group interaction encouraged at school. This ability to socialise with people of all ages and in a variety of settings is an invaluable life skill. Home schooled students are also used to a certain amount of so-called self-direction and are often quite independent learners, which is another quality that is extremely advantageous in work and tertiary education environments.

Another important issue is funding. Under current regulations, home schooling parents in this country, through their taxes, support other people's children who attend State and private schools. On the other hand, they do not receive any Government funding themselves. Educating one's children at home can be an expensive exercise and the vast majority of home schooling families, for obvious reasons, are on a single income. I believe that parents who choose to home school their children should receive tax cuts as, first, they are already costing the Government less due to their decision to home school their children; and, secondly, they are supporting everyone else's children through their tax contributions to education. If the Government wishes to improve the standard of home schooling in this country in compliance with regulatory authorities, I believe this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Finally, I do not believe that home schooling parents should be required to adhere strictly to the New South Wales syllabus. In order to achieve a quality education, I believe it is not necessary or even desirable that each unique child should be educated in a uniform way. Home schooling does not exempt parents from providing a quality and indeed academically rigorous education for their children. However, it means that they can deliver that education in a way that suits the individual child.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: Good afternoon. First, I thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. My name is Karen Chegwidden and I have been continuously registered for home education since 2005. I have home educated three students, all with different strengths and weaknesses. I have two graduates, both of whom are pursuing their education at a tertiary level. I had prepared a short slide show that I wanted to play to you today. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond my control that has not been possible. If you had been able to see it you would have seen photographs of home schooled children engaging in collaborative learning, engaging socially, and undertaking a wide variety of educational activities. These children are at the centre of all this. When we discuss home education, we discuss their futures.

I am passionate about education in general and home education, in particular. I believe that a range of educational options is essential. All families and all children are different with unique needs and abilities. When we reduce the options available, our community loses. No single system, no matter how excellent it may be, can possibly meet the needs of every child and family. We need more options, not less. We need public schools, we

need private schools, we need distance education and we need home education. We could possibly benefit from other options not currently available in New South Wales, such as charter schools, umbrella schools, cyber schools, advanced placement and part-time enrolment to name a few. Choice and flexibility will benefit all of our students and ultimately all Australians.

Over the years I have been privileged to interact with a diverse community of home schoolers. They come from all walks of life, have a wide variety of philosophical approaches to education, different religious, ethnic and political backgrounds and have different levels of education themselves, various skills and abilities. Despite these differences, universally I have found a group of people who are deeply committed to their children and education. Home education finds its basis in a principle enshrined in our own Education Act. Education is primarily the responsibility of the parent. I am quite concerned that as a group home schoolers are often invisible. Our family participates in the HILDA study each year. This is a major longitudinal study that is used by government to inform policy, amongst other things, and yet there are no responses that are appropriate for home education, instead being based on the assumption that children attend school.

When my older children applied to the Universities Admissions Centre [UAC] there was nowhere on that form to indicate that they had completed any secondary education since home schooling is not recognised there. I believe that we have arrived at this place in history due to a lack of understanding between home schoolers and mainstream educationalists and I hope that by opening a dialogue here today we can begin to deconstruct some of the unjustified fears and prejudice around home schooling. If we can unravel the current situation and work towards greater understanding, it will benefit all of our students. Registration for home education needs to be based on policies in which the major stakeholders have a voice.

I would like to see a system of registration in New South Wales which is supportive rather than critical, is collaborative rather than adversarial, provides information and resources to home educators, is overseen by a body in which home educators are appropriately represented, is conducted by people with an intimate knowledge of what home education is in its many forms and what it is not, is inclusive of special needs and gifted or accelerated students, is not restricted to a particular syllabus or curriculum but is assessed for quality and appropriateness across the key learning areas, is based on student needs not indicative teaching hours, is flexible in its delivery, providing choice to families as to mode of registration such as documentation or visits, is inclusive of families who are travelling for prolonged periods of time, is flexible and inclusive of home education students in programs to which mainstream students have access such as TVET courses, immunisations, technologies such as the free laptops programs, HSC exams, regional sports and swimming carnivals and so on, a system that makes part-time enrolment in school or TAFE alongside home education registration possible and one that is available to all students from the beginning of their education up until the completion of year 12 or equivalent regardless of their age. Thank you.

Ms KIDD: I would like to thank everybody for having this inquiry because it means so much to the home education community and I have been a member of this community for eight years. I agree with Ms Chegwiddden. There is a lot of misunderstanding about home education and that is the basis of why we are here. One of the things that David Murphy said was that APs were not auditors; that they are there to give advice. That is not the experience.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What is an AP?

Ms KIDD: An authorised person.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The inspectors.

Ms KIDD: Yes, the people who come into our homes to do the inspections. He mentioned that they are not actually auditors; that they are there to give advice. That has not been our current experience. In the past I have had experience with APs who have definitely given advice and support and they have been very knowledgeable with home education and experience. In the last two or three years it has not been that. It has been about auditing our plans according to how they meet and match the New South Wales syllabus and as a teacher I am intimately aware and intimately involved with the New South Wales syllabus. It is what I trained in and I was taught by some of the authors of some parts of the syllabus. It is a document that is designed for school use, not for home education use.

It can definitely be looked at by home educators but there are so many more opportunities to teach your own child than just teaching them what they teach in school. You are limiting your child's education if you only

mimic what the school is doing. You do not have limits of time constraints. You can go on an excursion whenever you want. You can match their learning styles. You can go and have experiences that are meaningful and engage with the community. You do not have to sequence the learning in all of the key learning areas [KLAs] according to their age, like you have to do in school, and I understand that from a perspective of a teacher who has never home educated it is a natural presumption that if you match the learning that is happening in school with the learning at home there should be equality of educational outcomes, but that is a misinterpretation of what is going on with home education.

I think the primary problem with the current system with the Board of Studies is that these people are coming from a teaching perspective and a school perspective and while I am fully committed to public education and social justice and I think that our public schools could be very much improved, we are not talking about public education and trying to make home schooling like public education. It is an important alternative and as a teacher, a professional educator, it is a very rich educational community. The Board of Studies is missing out on getting information that would improve their own practices by shutting the door and only doing prescriptive conversations with us, so when David Murphy said that they are not auditors, that has not been the experience. The fundamental changes they made are they have changed the name from home education to home schooling.

Dr JOHN KAYE: When were these changes made?

Ms KIDD: The 2013 IP. On the front of the IP 2011 information package and 2013 information package it says, "Home Education for 2011" and "Home Schooling for 2013". Home schooling liaison officers employed by the Department of Education are often involved with cases where children are being removed from schools and starting home schooling. It is a very confusing term and parents who are not educated in home education yet—they have not met anyone in the home education community, they have not made any contact—presume sometimes that home school liaison people are there to help them to begin home schooling. Schools often do not give information about home education registration. They try to keep those children within the school system, so even though on the surface it looks like a very superficial change, it is fundamentally important that we define home school liaison officers in the Department of Education's jurisdiction separate to home education because it causes unnecessary confusion.

I think a key point is we need to respect more that home education has a valid place within our education experience with educating all children within New South Wales. Distance education was raised. There was a concern that children being put into a school context would cause problems if they were just rocking up basically to school during lunch or various things. Because the child who is registered as home educated is actually under the jurisdiction of their parents, they are legally responsible for their education. The parent would need to accompany the child to a school during any interaction, so the concerns from the Department of Education that children would not be covered by the teachers, they would not know who they are, the children would not be attending the school alone; they would be coming with their parents. The information I was gleaming from that concern had to do with, "Well, who is responsible for these children?"

Well, they are not actually under any funding umbrella so the Department of Education would have concern with who is responsible. Who is getting paid to make sure that that child is safe? No-one would be paid for that child to be safe because they are not receiving any funding. Parents would be accompanying that child so I do not think it is necessarily a child welfare issue. It is more to do with jurisdiction of care. Who is actually legally responsible? Home educational hours mean to me my children's individual learning needs, which is what I need to do according to the Education Act. My two children and I are in a community of learners, teachers, experts and volunteers. It is a rich learning community. It is not in isolation; we are hardly ever at home.

My children currently, today, are with my auntie and my auntie is profoundly deaf. They learn Auslan from my auntie as she taught me Auslan. They communicate with lip reading and with Auslan. My 10-year-old son just learnt how to sew. He has been using a machine at a local community program that we have been attending for a term where 10 ladies have volunteered to teach children for free how to sew so that this learning gets passed on to a generation that may not go towards it naturally. My daughter, who is 13, attended a younger learner writing program where she was immersed with people of varying ages, mostly teenagers, and professional writers in a week-long program of workshops.

Those three activities, the Auslan, the sewing and the writing, are not considered to be part of my child's learning program, according to the Board of Studies information package because they do not occur inside the home so I cannot include them. My issue as a teacher is: what are we assessing? Are we assessing the

learning that is happening? Are we getting quality responses from families about what these children are learning or are we getting compliance to replicate the New South Wales syllabus and I would argue it is the latter. Thank you.

CHAIR: My question is pretty simple. What is the specific problem with the 2013 information pack? Where and what exactly is the problem?

Ms VIEIRA: The problem started in 2011—

CHAIR: I understand that.

Ms VIEIRA: —when they changed minimum curriculum to minimum guidelines to the New South Wales syllabus. The 2013 pack is the first one that links it to the outcomes and to compliance. In 2011 it did not spell it out but in 2013 it did and they clamped down.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: I think the other big problem is that changes were made before consultation took place, so from my perspective that is a huge problem. No other group in this country would expect to have to bend to regulation that was changed. It is like shifting the goal posts with no notice.

CHAIR: Are you aware that there is such a handbook as the Authorised Persons Handbook and the code of conduct of authorised persons contained in such a book?

Ms KIDD: Yes, I am. They actually just released it in August, so last month they released a new authorised handbook.

CHAIR: Is that a second edition or third edition?

Ms KIDD: It is the August 2014 edition.

CHAIR: So there have been previous editions to that?

Ms KIDD: Yes, there have.

CHAIR: What is different in that handbook to previous editions?

Ms KIDD: For the last two, so between the 2013 and 2014 handbook there is now no longer a withdrawal-from-application form to fill in. You have to do it yourself by a letter or email and then the usual changes of the names of Board of Studies to BOSTES.

CHAIR: If you have an issue with an authorised person and you want to move through a process to deal with that, are any witnesses aware of working through a process if you have an issue with an authorised person?

Ms KIDD: There is no mechanism in order for us to make complaints about either the visits or the information package itself. We have had a lot of people contact the Board of Studies about the information package and no matter what question you put to the Board of Studies, we all receive exactly the same response: that there are no changes to the Board of Studies IP, only the introduction of the new English New South Wales syllabus and we must comply with it. That has been the response back. We have taken our concern about the Board of Studies' lack of responding to our concerns detailed in the letters. They do not respond to the individual concerns—we have asked the New South Wales Minister for Education to ask, on our behalf, the Board of Studies why they will not answer that. All of those letters were then forwarded to the Board of Studies to answer on his behalf. So in effect he did not answer our questions; he got the Board of Studies to respond to concerns about the Board of Studies. I was not very satisfied with that. As a parent but also as a teacher I did not think that was necessarily following correct procedure. I did not expect that would happen in a school environment.

CHAIR: Would you endorse an opportunity to have an inclusive home school advisory council?

Ms KIDD: Of course.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: Absolutely.

Ms VIEIRA: Absolutely.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Kidd, you have said that the board said there were no changes to the information package. The Committee was told this morning that changes were made to the information package and they were outlined to us—this is between 2011 and 2013—but there was no change to the registration procedure. Is that what you meant?

Ms KIDD: When we wrote our letters—I will speak for myself. When I wrote my letter—I think I wrote two or three letters—I asked about the IP and the registration process because I had noticed a change. I have been registered since 2008—prior to that my child was too young—and there have been changes to the process.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You told the Committee before that you had been told that there were no changes to the information package.

Ms KIDD: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The board told us today that there were changes. To be clear you have all said there were changes; are you saying they denied the obvious?

Ms KIDD: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you have that letter and are you prepared to table it?

Ms KIDD: Yes, I will table that letter.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Vieira, on page 20 of your submission you said—

Ms VIEIRA: I do not have it with me.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I think you will probably remember writing this: "It is the domain of Family and Community Services to oversee child protection—not the Board of Studies and not the Education Department" Do you stand by that statement?

Ms VIEIRA: I know that mandatory reporting is part of a teacher's role in school—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you stand by the statement that child protection should purely be the role of one government department, not a whole-of-government activity?

Ms VIEIRA: No, I believe we all have a responsibility to make sure children are safe but I think it is primarily Family and Community Services.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I am having difficulty understanding what you are saying. In your written submission to the Committee you explicitly say it is not the domain of two government departments or agencies: Board of Studies and the Education department. Do you resile from that statement?

CHAIR: Ms Vieira, a copy of your submission is being given to you.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you accept the Wood special commission findings—

Ms VIEIRA: I am unaware of any special commission findings. I am just saying that child protection is everybody's responsibility and primarily the responsibility of Family and Community Services. I am not a lawyer. I do not read into my things what I say; I just wrote what I thought.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So the Committee is not supposed to take what you have written in your submission literally?

Ms VIEIRA: It is my opinion that Family and Community Services are the body responsible for ensuring child welfare but all of us have that responsibility.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But you said it is not the domain?

Ms VIEIRA: Absolutely it is not their domain. The domain of the Board of Studies and the department of Education are to ensure that children are educated.

Dr JOHN KAYE: That is actually incorrect. I will go back one step. In the paragraph before that you say, "The local society"—I presume you mean the local community—"is well and truly able to report any suspected abuse, neglect or serious issues."

Ms VIEIRA: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are effectively saying that we should rely upon neighbours and community members to report matters; there is no need for other reporting?

Dr VIEIRA: I think what Ms Vieira is probably saying is that it is not primarily the role of the department of Education. I may be incorrect but I think that is what she is saying.

Ms VIEIRA: That is correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You might like to correct the record.

Ms VIEIRA: Okay, I will change my submission to say "primarily".

Dr JOHN KAYE: To that extent you might write to the Committee. You say, "The local society is well and truly able to report any suspected abuse, neglect or serious issues." Do you think that neighbourhood surveillance is adequate and we do not need anything else?

Ms VIEIRA: Not at all, but it is the job of Family and Community Services. I have had to report children being abused and neglected and it was not taken at all seriously. It took six months for anyone to go to the home.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You are moving away from the question I put to you. My question was specifically, "The local society is well and truly able to report any suspected abuse, neglect or serious issues."

Ms VIEIRA: I think if somebody wants to hide something they can hide it regardless. I do not think that home schooling inspectors coming into the home will make children safer.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Dr Vieira, you are not currently home schooling, are you?

Dr VIEIRA: That is correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is your intention to home school?

Dr VIEIRA: That is correct.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Vieira, you are not currently home schooling?

Ms VIEIRA: I am currently home schooling and have been since 1991.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What impact did the change in the information package have on home schooling?

Ms VIEIRA: As I said in my introductory thing it took me 200 hours to prepare for my home schooling visit, to be able to link it with syllabus outcomes and to tick boxes. It did nothing towards providing quality of education; it was just paperwork.

CHAIR: Did you document that process? Did you document what you were doing for 200 hours?

Ms VIEIRA: Did I keep tally of the minutes I spent, no.

CHAIR: Two hundred hours is a lot of time.

Ms VIEIRA: It is a lot of time. I know what time of day I did it and I know how many days I did it.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Vieira, in your submission you say, "Syllabuses come and go with the whims of political parties, political correctness and perceived deficiencies in previous systems."

Ms VIEIRA: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can you give the Committee an example in the New South Wales syllabus where political correctness or a political party has actually had any impact on the syllabus? You have made an accusation there that the syllabus in New South Wales is subject to political correctness—

Ms VIEIRA: Phonics is a good example. Previously phonics was not the way to teach reading and phonics has come back into fashion. It used to be, it was not and it has come back into fashion.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Which political party was pushing phonics or opposing phonics?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: You would possibly be in a better position to answer that question than us.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I am. I have been in this Parliament for 7½ years and I have never heard any member go one way or the other on phonics.

Ms VIEIRA: Have you had people discussing syllabus in minute detail in political parties?

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, we do not.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Would you like to take that question on notice?

Dr JOHN KAYE: My concern is that you have made an allegation against the Board of Studies that I find quite serious given that this Parliament and all governments—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am sorry. I hear what—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Please let me complete my question.

CHAIR: Order. I remind members that if they want to draw attention to a question or a statement by a witness then they should do so by way of point of order.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Point of order: Ms Vieira, are you aware that if a question is put to you that you would like to consider in order to prepare a response then you can take that question on notice?

CHAIR: That is not a point of order but that is part of the process.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Point of order: Everyone on this Committee is very experienced in examining witnesses and we have a tradition in relation to experienced witnesses versus not experienced witnesses. Those conventions and rules should be adhered to.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Vieira, I ask you to respond to what I am saying. I see the first sentence on page 19 of your submission as a very serious allegation: "Syllabuses come and go with the whims of political parties, political correctness and perceived deficiencies in previous systems."

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What is the question?

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is that not an attack on the Board of Studies and its integrity?

Ms VIEIRA: No, it is not an attack on the Board of Studies.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are you suggesting in that statement that the Board of Studies is subject to political influence in its development of syllabuses? [*Time expired.*]

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Various submissions to this inquiry specify that the motivation behind home schooling for a lot of parents is to provide education and harmony with your belief system. Can I ask each of you to address that in respect of your own motivations towards home schooling? What has led you to favour home schooling? Is it a religious motivation or a philosophical motivation?

Ms KIDD: I do not have a religious motivation towards home schooling at all. I am a secular home schooler so I do not have a religious background. My motivation is as an educator, as a professional teacher. I had a child who read three years ahead when she entered kindergarten. Just prior to her turning five she could already read a newspaper. Professionally I knew that she was going to run into problems in the mainstream system. After class one of her teachers pulled me aside and said, "Please don't discourage her from reading but could you stop encouraging her to read at home because the other children need to catch up. If she continues to be ahead she won't make any friends." After she made this statement I pointed my child out—who was in the playground talking and playing with her friends—and said, "Do you mean that child over there, my daughter?" She said, "Yes. I said, "The one who is playing with her friends?" She said, "Yes." Obviously there was a teacher who was not identifying her learning needs. As an educator it is my job to make sure that my children receive an education that matches their learning needs and that teacher was not able to do that.

I continued on with the school because my daughter wanted to attend but when my daughter chose to go towards home education I supported her. The reason she knew about home education was because one of her best friends was being home educated. So we had an experience within our social group that children were choosing between school and home school. That came about because they all went to Montessori preschool. They were already fairly well educated about education basically. From the age of three they had been attending an educational program. It is not a preschool; it is an educational three-year program for age three to six. In our family culture, me being a teacher, her attending an education program, choosing to go to a normal kindergarten and then choosing to go to home education, it was normal conversation for us. My approach towards my second child who is three years younger, he is a kinaesthetic learner, he moves about a lot to learn and his language was delayed—it is my submission—I just knew it was likely that he would be misdiagnosed.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: In short, it was perceived actual shortcomings in the education system that motivated you to home school?

Ms KIDD: Having worked in it, I understand the limitations of the education system. I am very passionate towards public education. My children and I have actually funded some donation money towards a school starting up. We are supportive of the education system but I know its limitations.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: As outlined in my submission, I would identify us initially as refugees from the school system. My children went to school; it was not a successful or happy learning place for them. For my son in particular there were ever increasingly large issues. Those stemmed from a learning difficulty that he has—he has been diagnosed with dyslexia—and were later compounded by anxiety, which developed as a result of his experiences in the school system. This is all very much outlined in my submission. Like Ms Kidd, my daughter also had a similar experience in kindergarten. She went off to school, did the work that was put in front of her and began reading—she went through all of the kindy readers and read through all of the year one readers. By the end of the kindergarten year she had read through all of the infant school readers, at which point the teacher came to me and said, "She needs to start again at the beginning because she is not allowed to go to the primary part of the school to get books." I felt that was ridiculous.

Although we left the school in crisis because of my son and we had tried several schools by the end—we gave it a pretty committed sort of a go, having been to private school and public school, Steiner school and distance education—by the time we came to home education life was complicated in our house. There were now lots of issues to address that had not really existed before school became part of our world. Yet looking backwards I can see that decision was not a negative decision as a reaction to an inadequacy of the school; it has been a really positive decision for our family and for our children.

Although the reasons for it were negative, the decision in itself was positive. We had a problem and we took positive action to solve that problem. Many years down the track I now describe myself as a philosophical home schooler. Certainly home schooling changed our lives. It brought a level of saneness to our family life and removed a whole lot of stress that had not been able to be dealt with in any other way. We had been to medical

experts, sought educational help, participated in the schools and this was the thing that changed our lives. I truly believe this is the thing that has given my eldest son his best chance.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Ms Vieira, was it similar motivation for you?

Ms VIEIRA: I read a book about home schooling. I had never heard about it before and it sounded very exciting to be able to teach your children according to their needs. If they were good at something you could accelerate them and if they needed more time you could take the time and break it down and the opportunity to, as a family, be more involved in their education. Each of us brings up our children according to our priorities and religion is part of my priority and that affects how I teach my children. There are plenty of religious schools that teach their children according to their religious beliefs. I do not think that is an issue for or against, it is life. The opportunity to meet children's needs, to accelerate those that are quick and not have them bored and wasting time and getting into trouble or to go slower if they needed more time was the main motivation.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Most parents are not teachers or are not qualified educationalists. In the home schooling area how can the State and the community be satisfied that there are the requisite safeguards to ensure quality assurance in home schooling education? Given that the department does not seem to think its staff are auditors—I know you have a different experience—how can we be confident there is quality assurance in home schooling?

Ms KIDD: I think the Board of Studies have a responsibility there. In order to ascertain that children are actually learning they should be requiring the parents to write individual learning plans according to the Education Act and be assessing those and actual learning experiences. The current information package is very clear that it outlines that the parents need to create a plan based on the New South Wales syllabus and be taught according to it, but that might not meet the child's learning needs. The Education Act requires, correct me if I am wrong, making a plan that meets the minimum curriculum requirements and gives a bit more scope for parents to write a plan that meets those needs.

Those programs can be assessed at the end of a period of time. When the AP comes back they should be able to see how well that plan went. Plans change as the child's learning needs change and to document the learning. Making the procedure that the Board of Studies goes through the basis, rather than having to mimic school documents, is how they can assure the public that these children are being educated. The APs are professional educators. They should be able to assess whether a learning plan matches the New South Wales syllabus. The parents should not have to duplicate the document. The onus should not be on the parents to do that. The AP should be professional enough to look at any plan and see where it meets the syllabus.

Dr VIEIRA: Fundamentally, speaking from my experience being home schooled, it is possible to assess home schooled children in the way you would assess children who are schooled. I know that when I was being taught at home we used to participate in NAPLAN testing and obviously there were no issues with that. My mother was a stay-at-home mum and had no tertiary education. My dad is a builder and myself and my sisters have done well. We have gone on to tertiary education and done well at that. I think it is possible for any motivated and intelligent parent, even if they do not have tertiary qualifications in education, to educate children at home if they have the support that they need.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: And the skills and aptitude?

Dr VIEIRA: That's right. I think that is where the Board of Studies has a responsibility to help them and potentially an arm of the Board of Studies dedicated to home education.

Dr JOHN KAYE: And assess whether they have the skills and aptitude?

Dr VIEIRA: Do you mean the parents or the children?

Dr JOHN KAYE: The parents. You agreed with Mr Searle they should have the skills and aptitude?

Dr VIEIRA: Absolutely.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Who should assess that?

Dr VIEIRA: Are you suggesting a test for the parents?

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, I am asking you, do you think that is a valid function for the board to secure?

Dr VIEIRA: I do not know that is a valid function for the board. It should be fairly evident when you have a home educating parent in front of you and they are showing you what they have prepared for the children, the learning plans and how the children are going it should be obvious to a professional educator whether this parent is capable of doing that. I do not think that would a particularly difficult thing to assess.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Certainly, but let us assume that there is obviously a variety of skills and aptitude in the broader community.

Dr VIEIRA: Yes.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: But where it is quite clear that the parent is neither skilled nor has the aptitude and simply cannot do it, home schooling should not be permitted in those circumstances surely?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: I think it would be difficult to make that kind of assessment in a vacuum. If a parent has the commitment and the enthusiasm to take full responsibility for their child's education then they should be permitted to at least try.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Let us explore that. I do not think that anybody on this Committee doubts that parents are genuinely motivated in favour of achieving the best for their children. We all accept that parents are genuinely motivated, but while none of the school systems are perfect and there is a variety of skills and aptitude amongst teachers, teachers are licensed or approved to ply their trade, parents not so, obviously. Where parents are going to take on the responsibility for education and where it is clear to the APs that maybe they do not have the skills and aptitude, surely allowing home schooling in those circumstances places those children's education at risk?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: My question to you is how would you ascertain that the parent lacks those skills and aptitudes in the absence of any evidence to the contrary? The UK has a system—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Can we flip that?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: Can I finish? The UK has a system where they assume that all is well unless they have a reason to believe otherwise. Unless they have some sort of evidence to make them think that there is a problem they assume that the parent is taking their responsibilities to educate their child quite seriously.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: This is not a question about whether the parent is approaching the issue seriously, it is whether or not they have the skills and capability to do so. It returns to an earlier question I asked about how the community can be comfortable that there is quality assurance in the home schooling experience. Home schooling is the exception rather than the norm. If we are going to deviate from the norm there has to be some quality assurance. My question is how we can secure the assurance that that is taking place.

Ms VIEIRA: One good way would be to allow us access to distance education. I wanted my sons to do engineering but there was no pathway for them to do HSC engineering. I do not have the skills to teach them engineering. Access to distance education would allow us to provide quality education in areas we do not feel comfortable educating in. In my experience, having been doing it for 24 years, I have only had two people who approached me about home schooling that, once I told them what it is really like said, "I do not want to do that work." One did for a term and quickly put them back in school. If you give people enough rope they will hang themselves if they are not genuine. The authorised person at my last visit when I asked why it has come to this said, "Because we have had a whole pile of people who wanted to get welfare and they could only get it by saying they are home schooling their kids".

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I read that part of your submission.

Ms VIEIRA: They are not really going to home school their kids. Give them a year and they will hang themselves. They will give up because it is too hard. It is a lot of work and, if they are serious, parents make the necessary time and effort to research and to get help. With the internet it is easier than when I started in 1991. There is so much available, so much networking, advice, help and different curricula. It is much easier to get the

support you need. Support and advice is helpful in the early stages but most of this needs to be accessed through other home schoolers but there needs to be access to educational opportunities in areas where we do not have expertise. We are human, we cannot teach every subject.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Dr Vieira, I was surprised to hear earlier that BOSTES did not have in place a consultative and advisory committee of home educators. I heard you say that you would welcome that. Has that offer been put to you by BOSTES?

Dr VIEIRA: No. My oldest child is five so I am not formally home schooling yet.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Are you aware of that offer being put to anyone else?

Dr VIEIRA: No, I am not.

Ms VIEIRA: Years and years ago they had a group that met once a month with the Board of Studies. But there was so much diversity amongst the home schoolers that it proved non-productive and they got rid of it.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Do you believe among home schoolers there would be a desire to have such an advisory consultative body to regularly tick-tack with BOSTES?

Dr VIEIRA: Yes.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: I believe 10,000 signatures probably say yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You are not aware of any major part of the home schoolers that are refusing to be part of or making preconditions to being part of a formal consultative arrangement are you?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: I do not think we can discuss in an open forum with the Board of Studies changes that have already been made without consultation without first agreeing to take a step back. I think that is what you are referring to, is it not?

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: What I put to you is that you would be prepared to support a consultative and advisory committee where there can be an exchange of views without putting a whole series of preconditions to that being set up, because that would work against your own interests, wouldn't it?

Ms VIEIRA: The frustrating thing has been dealing with the Board of Studies since the new information pack came out. I have had many long phone calls with Anne Keenan and David Murphy, particularly Anne Keenan, and many letters back and forth, but none of it was satisfying. I did not feel like they were listening to my concerns or taking any notice. They were punishing everybody for the sake of a few—that is what it felt like.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: If there was a formal consultative body set up under strict guidelines?

Ms VIEIRA: That would be wonderful.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: That would be a different situation. It would not be a moving feast, it would be something that would be set in concrete. Would you welcome that?

Ms VIEIRA: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Ms Vieira, tell us the end results of home schooling with regard to your own children. How did they end up?

Ms VIEIRA: My eldest son is a senior secondary teacher teaching English and history in Wagga, the next daughter is a registered nurse, the next daughter is a primary school teacher, the next son is a fitter machinist, the next daughter trained in hospitality and tourism, the next daughter has a diploma in children services and works in in-home care, the next son is a carpenter, the next daughter is at university, and the other two are being home schooled.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: They did well with home schooling?

Ms VIEIRA: Absolutely.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Ms Chegwiddden, can I ask you the same question? In 20 seconds.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: In 20 seconds: My 18-year-old daughter is in her second year of a bachelor of music at Newcastle university doing a double major in performance and composition, and my son is completing a Newstep program this year at Newcastle university in preparation for sports science next year, that is his goal. He has completed a certificate IV in laboratory techniques at TAFE last year. He is 17 now.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Ms Kidd, will you take that on notice and give us a written response in 21 days?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I wanted to ask about the issue of financial support. You mentioned that transport concessions are not available to children?

Ms VIEIRA: As far as I am aware.

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: It is not strictly correct. I was successful in obtaining a concession card for both of my older children once they reached the age of 14 and 15 via the department of transport after significant lobbying and letter writing to the relevant Government Ministers by myself.

Ms VIEIRA: It is certainly nothing the Board of Studies tells us we have access to and this is the way.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am not from Sydney.

Ms VIEIRA: I am not either.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You have a student travel card, is that normally what students would have?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: No.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Can you explain what the problem is?

Ms CHEGWIDDEN: Schools issue student ID cards to their students. Our students do not have ID cards so the issue then becomes how you access concession passes. The issue for us raised its head quite early on when my daughter was 13 or 14 and bus drivers started saying to her that she was going to have to pay full fare unless she could produce a concession card. That is what prompted my letter writing campaign. We successfully have obtained concession passes for those students.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But there is not a system. When you do your home schooling application there is no form for you to fill out?

Ms VIEIRA: That is correct.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What forms of financial support do you receive?

Ms VIEIRA: We get the back to school allowance but I think that has been cancelled, has it not? That is it.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: There is no additional support?

Ms VIEIRA: No. If we were to get funding it would probably come with strings attached so I am happy not to get funding. But to be able to get tax concessions for what we spend would be nice, or access to Distance Ed free.

Ms KIDD: There are a limited number of people who access the isolated children's allowance but that is very limited and that is not a normal procedure through the Board of Studies. It is an external procedure that people go through and it is only in extreme circumstances.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Dr Vieira, how did you get into medicine? What was your pathway into that course?

Dr VIEIRA: When I was studying year 12 I sat the American equivalent of the Higher School Certificate [HSC], which is the SAT, because home school students do not have access to HSC subjects. I sat the SAT and I did quite well in that. I also started studying some university subjects by correspondence through Monash, Curtin and Griffith universities. By the end of my first year of a Bachelor of Arts I had a high distinction average and I applied to medicine on the basis of that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The American test is open and anybody can register for it?

Dr VIEIRA: It is open to anyone. That is right.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But the New South Wales HSC is not open?

Dr VIEIRA: That is correct.

Ms VIEIRA: We have established plenty of pathways to university now. It is not university we have trouble accessing, it is more TAFE.

CHAIR: Unfortunately we have to finish but I will ask a question that you can take on notice. Do you think it is a bit unfair that the Government allocates about \$14,000 per child in New South Wales public schools and you get nothing of that but you get the onus, accountability and everything else on top of that? You have to pay for your crayons, power and everything else. Do you think that is unjust?

Dr VIEIRA: Yes.

Ms KIDD: Yes.

CHAIR: That finishes that.

Ms VIEIRA: It would be nice to have voucher funding to pay for music lessons.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I was a bit surprised to learn that home schooling participants do not have access to the HSC. Can you explain your understanding of why that is the case?

CHAIR: The witnesses can take that on notice because I have asked for that to be noted. These are the sorts of anomalies that we are looking for.

Ms VIEIRA: We can do self-tuition subjects but not all subjects through the HSC are available as self-tuition. Anything with a practical component, like science, you cannot do as a self-tuition candidate.

CHAIR: If you could submit something that breaks down how that works it would be helpful. Thank you for coming in and giving your story to this important inquiry. At the end of the day the spirit of the inquiry is that we want the very best outcomes for our kids. It does not matter which education system that is in; whatever the parents choose they do their very best to give them that outcome in life. Thank you for your time and your effort.

(The witnesses withdrew)

NATHANAEL VANDERKOLK, home schooled student,

JESSE GIBSON, home schooled student,

SHARON WU, member, Home Education Support and Action Network,

MARIANNE VANDERKOLK, Chair, Home Education Support and Action Network, and

TALITHA VANDERKOLK, home schooled student, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Welcome to the inquiry. Would anyone like to make an opening statement?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: We would all like to make an opening statement but I will begin.

CHAIR: If we are all making one can we make sure we keep it brief and obviously allow a little extra grace for the teenagers.

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: My husband and I have home educated our six children for almost 20 years. We decided to home educate them because we believe that the direct involvement and the one-on-one tutoring and the building up of good family relationships was in the best interests of our children. We have wanted to see our children take an active role in their own education and so we encouraged them to follow their interests and passions and we sought to guide them and give them the resources to do so.

We have loved learning alongside of them. Through the years we have studied many topics as a family. We have read widely together, played music, created costumes, given speeches, made models, experimented and hosted family days or special events for other home schooling families, including historical days. We have been involved in group learning and in community events and enjoyed the flexibility of open source education via the internet. My children have been able to follow their interests. Their interests range from building websites, some which are still currently available today, to creating digital music and raising stick insects and silkworms and butterflies and watching the whole process. Because five of my children are boys they really enjoyed building an 8-metre car track that raced six cars at a time.

Home education has made it possible for us to create unique experiences and programs to suit the learning styles of our six children. The families that we represent in the Home Education Support and Action Network [HESAN] have similar stories. We want to see a meaningful system in New South Wales and an independent body that accepts and embraces diversity and that welcomes engagement and is supportive of families who choose to educate their own children. As home schooling parents Sharon and I are part of the picture but it is more so the story of our children. That is why we have brought two children who are currently being home schooled as well as one graduate.

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: I have been home schooling for all my life and I would just like to share a few things I love about home schooling. Home schooling gives me the freedom to learn and explore subjects in great detail and pursue my interests. I also love being able to bond and learn together with my family as well as share experiences. I also love being able to meet with other home school peers to be involved with drama, choir, sports, home school formals, debating, which I just came from, and dance, mock trials, excursions, et cetera, as well as catch-ups. These are a few reasons I love home schooling.

Ms WU: I have six children also, a 16-year-old girl and five boys from four to 14 years old. We have been home educating for over five years. Our children were in school until my daughter was halfway through year six and we took them out for a six-month trial just to see what it was like. We had only been doing it a couple of months and we realised that it was the way we wanted to live. What I love most about home education is watching my children thrive and become confident, productive young people. They were shy and marginalised at school. In marked contrast they can now confidently walk into a group of strangers no matter what age and make friends. They initiate, they take on leadership and they are always willing to give something a go.

Home education of our children is probably the hardest but most rewarding thing that I have ever done. We love learning and exploring together. We love investigating, reading books and going on adventures to discover more things. For us learning is totally addictive. The only thing we cannot understand in our family is

how to be bored. Home education may not be suitable for every family but our family agrees it is the best choice for us.

As much as we love home education we were concerned that we would have to stop in August last year. The new information pack for home schooling outlined changes that seemed impossible to comply with as the new regulations were prescriptive and stifling. We registered for home schooling as we acknowledge that the government needs to manage society but we are concerned that it has almost become a form of micromanagement. We would like to see registration as supportive, guiding us rather than prescribing. We need a system that recognises and supports home education as a different and valid alternative. We need a system that is honest and true and that will stand the test of time. That is why we are asking for a system similar to the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council [THEAC] model.

Mr GIBSON: At five years old I was sent to a local private school. All my life my favourite question has been "Why?". My teachers rarely were able to answer my question, which killed my enthusiasm for learning. When we first considered home schooling, my dad objected. He did not see a way of getting into university or even obtaining a comprehensive education using the home schooling system. However, after listening to some home schooling testimonies and strategies on how to get into university, we started home schooling. I like home schooling because it is about the work you do, not the time you have to spend. This gave me an opportunity to passionately take up my hobby of rock and mineral collecting. At first I missed my friends at school, but I quickly made lots of new friends. I have never regretted the day that we started home schooling. I hope that this inquiry will understand the great benefits of home schooling and act upon them.

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: I am thankful that I was given the opportunity to be home educated. I could study at my own pace and was not required to follow the exact routine or content like every other kid in the classroom or in my age group. My family has allowed me to have an amazing upbringing and that has led me to the position I am in today. This unique educational approach has given me the time and possibility to have a tailor-made education, to build my own skills, to take the initiative and, in particular, to be able to jump into being an entrepreneur at a young age.

From 16 to 22 years of age most of my knowledge about search engine optimisation and web design came completely from being self-taught and having a hunger to learn and to grow my abilities. Being home educated certainly gave me both the ability to look outside the square and the initiative to try something different. My company has recently merged with another online marketing agency to encompass expertise across the industry. At only 24 I am the director of the Australian Institute of Internet Marketing, one of the largest online marketing companies in Australia. We will turn over close to \$10 million, we have about 1,000 clients and we employ more than 30 staff. I am excited about the next step and am thankful for the opportunity to be home educated.

CHAIR: What is the specific problem with the 2013 information package?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: The main problem with the information package is its prescriptiveness. It is far more prescriptive than it was in the past.

CHAIR: Mr Murphy from the Board of Studies, Teaching and Education Standards NSW said that even though the words had been changed the spirit was still in line with the creativity provided for in the 2011 pack. I understood him to say that even though the words had been changed it still had flexibility. Is that your experience?

Ms WU: I was here earlier when you asked about how the words had been changed. The 2011 pack states:

Home schooling, also called home education, allows a parent to integrate the NSW Board of Studies curriculum with the learning processes that occur naturally in the home throughout a child's development.

The 2013 pack states:

Home schooling, also referred to as home education, requires a parent to deliver the NSW Board of Studies curriculum.

We see that as a significant change in language and intent. That is a very good example of the way the pack has changed.

CHAIR: Are the authorised persons who come out to guide, shape or audit what you are doing implementing that intent? Are they saying, "It is not meant to be like that; it should be interpreted according to the 2011 pack"?

Ms WU: That varies with the families in our group. A lady who is a former principal visits me. She looks at my program and she can tell straightaway what I am doing. It is really good; it is a positive experience for me. There are other people in our group who have had completely the opposite experience. One of the authorised persons visited a parent who wanted to start home schooling and told her that she must home school between 9.00 a.m. and 3.00 p.m. She had written a timetable showing that the child would do an hour of work from 7.00 a.m. until 8.00 a.m. She would then take the other child to school. That was rejected and she was told that the other child must have a workbook while she took the other child to school. She said that the child had already done an hour of work, but she was told that that was unacceptable. That is a bit ridiculous, but that is what was required. In the end, because of all these things she pulled out.

CHAIR: That reminds me of the four personalities referred to in the Myers-Briggs test. Do you think that the way they approach home schooling requirements has more to do with the authorised person's personality and the way they do business? Your authorised person was very flexible and open and we heard Ms Kidd say that a good authorised person will see it for what it is and know instantly that it is in the spirit of what we are trying to achieve.

Ms WU: It would have something to do with their personality. However, it has more to do with how well they understand home schooling. My authorised person has been registering families for a long time and she is very positive. When she walks in she says, "Oh, I just know you're going to be fantastic home schooling your children. Let's just have a look at what you are doing." She is positive; she says home schooling is fantastic for children.

The authorised person who visited the other woman had not been in that position for very long. He was a former school inspector and his approach was extremely different. To be fair to him, he probably thought that he would be assessing a school even though it was in a home. We cannot educate the same way. I have one child at every stage. I cannot teach one in stage two, one in stage three and so on. When we do history we need to do it all together. Therefore, I cannot follow the curriculum and my authorised person recognises that. She says that what I am doing is good because by the time they finish they will have done everything and it will have been covered well. They are enjoying it and there are models all over the place. It is great. If you come into my home and expect to see something that looks like a school, I will fail.

CHAIR: Jesse, does your interest in rocks and minerals come into any of your studies? Is there enough flexibility in the curriculum to accommodate that interest?

Mr GIBSON: No, minerals are not in the curriculum.

CHAIR: So you cannot take a trip to Lightning Ridge as part of your studies?

Mr GIBSON: That is called a holiday.

CHAIR: If we really want to invest in our children through education, what do we need to fix? How would you fix the system?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: We were to going to read out our recommendations.

CHAIR: We have a copy.

Ms WU: We have prepared a document.

CHAIR: That document will be tabled.

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: That document explains our recommendations and why we think they are important.

CHAIR: Do you want to speak to any of them briefly?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Our main recommendation is that we have an independent body. The role of the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards NSW is to register nongovernment schools. We feel that they are coming to register home schooling with that mentality and that understanding. We need an independent body that can oversee, facilitate and support home education. That would be a better model. That body should comprise experienced home educators and others appointed by the Minister. In that way, the people assessing us would understand the mechanism.

CHAIR: Can you table that document?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Yes.

CHAIR: Talitha, please tell me about your home school formal. Some people think you do not do anything like that.

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: It was held last week. It was a spring formal. I go to a drama club and everyone in the senior class went. It was near Carss Park. It was just like a normal formal.

CHAIR: How many people went?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: I am not sure.

CHAIR: Were there 20, 30 or 50?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Probably 30.

CHAIR: Where were they from?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: From the one drama club. There have been other home school formals for all home schoolers.

CHAIR: What colour was your dress? I know that is important because I have a 16-year-old daughter who will be attending a formal soon.

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: It was black and gold.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I address my question to the parents here today. What do you teach about the age of the universe and the age of the Earth?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: We have a creationist point of view. We are Christians and we teach according to our understanding of the Bible.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What do you tell your children about the age of the universe?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: We would say that it is 6,000 to 10,000 years old.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mrs Wu, what do you teach your children?

Ms WU: We have a similar point of view, but we teach our children both.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you teach both as science?

Ms WU: We believe there are two views about the beginning of the universe—evolution and creation. Our children know and understand both.

Dr JOHN KAYE: With equal validity?

Ms WU: They know that I believe in creation. I think any parent, regardless of whether their children go to school or are home schooled, would give their point of view.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Jesse, what were you taught about the age of the universe?

Mr GIBSON: I was always told to read and try to understand. My Mum never forced any opinion on me.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What view do you hold about the age of the universe?

Mr GIBSON: At the moment I believe in creation; that the earth is 6,000 years old. But if new evidence was found I would always reconsider.

Dr JOHN KAYE: We might meet up later and I will show you some evidence. Were you presented by your mother or home schooler with a scientific opinion that the universe is 6,227 years old?

Mr GIBSON: My Mum gave me a book about creation and one about evolution side by side and told me to read both of them. She always let me understand the whole issue.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Did the book about creation tell you as a matter of fact that the Earth is 6,000 years old?

Mr GIBSON: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Nathanael, what were you taught?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: I was given a variety of scientific resources on which to base my view of the world. In that context, I formed my own opinion about what I believe.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Did any of those scientific resources talk about creationism?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: Some did.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In the context of scientific education you were given resources that referred to the universe as being less than 10,000 years old.

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: I believe that both evolution and creationism are faith.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you believe evolution is a faith?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is that what you were taught or is it what you believe?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: None of us was here when the world began or was created. So either opinion is a faith depending on how you look at the facts and arrive at an answer.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Mrs Vanderkolk, do you expose your children to the concept of evolution?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Yes. We do.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you tell them it is a faith or do you tell them it is based on scientific evidence?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Well I think they both come from points of view and they both come from where you set your belief. I would put them both in that same category that it is either belief in creationism or it is a belief in evolution.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Wu, would the opinions we have heard today be typical of the home schoolers in your organisation?

Ms WU: Do you mean about creation and evolution?

Dr JOHN KAYE: Yes?

Ms WU: That depends on what you believe. It is not anything to do with home schooling.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I think Dr Kaye's question was: Are the views you are expressing common in your organisation amongst the parents?

Ms WU: The families in HESAN?

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Yes, throughout your organisation?

Ms WU: I would say most of HESAN, so more than 50 per cent of HESAN, would probably be Christian. So that would probably be correct in saying that is what they would believe, but that would have to do with how many people are Christians, not to do with—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are you aware of the Board of Studies syllabus guidelines with respect to the teaching of evolution?

Ms WU: That is why we teach it.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But are you aware of the guidelines with respect to the teaching of creationism?

Ms WU: We do that at home. When my children were at school—

Dr JOHN KAYE: No, I am talking with respect to home schooling.

Ms WU: Yes. That is why we teach evolution and then any parent who is a Christian in their own time, which would be, I suppose, technically outside of the school hours, would be able to teach their children the fundamentals of what they believe.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I am sorry. I am confused. You told me before that you taught both to children?

Ms WU: I do teach both and that is because when you home school, you home school 24/7. We do not allocate a time when I would teach them evolution and a time when it would be satisfactory to teach them what I believe in a dinner time conversation or whatever. We do not put it into little boxes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Talitha, what do you make of all of this? What do you think?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: I have been taught both evolution and creation.

Dr JOHN KAYE: As co-equal theories; theories of equal validity?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Yes. I am a Christian. Our family is Christian. So I suppose I have been taught both so I have my own opinion. I get to pick what side, I suppose, I agree with, but I do agree with creation, but I am taught both.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You saw it as two sides, two competing theories of equal validity?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Well they are, I think.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You think creationism is a scientific theory?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Yep.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Does anybody at the table not accept that creationism is a scientific theory? Nathaniel, do you think creationism is a scientific theory?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: Yes, I believe it is.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Jesse, obviously you do. Sharon, you do?

Ms WU: Yes.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Most Christians of my acquaintance actually do not believe in creationism and do believe in evolution. So the link between Christianity and these beliefs is not necessarily coterminous, but am I correct in understanding that in your organisation when you say Christian you mean people who believe in creationism and do not believe in evolution?

Ms WU: Actually, that is a good point. I actually have not spoken to everyone in HESAN about what they believe.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Would the people to whom you have spoken?

Ms WU: The people I have spoken to, most of them would agree or would have beliefs aligned with what I believe, but I do not think all of them necessarily would.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Are you all aware that creationism is not widely accepted as a scientific theory at all?

CHAIR: I think the spirit of this inquiry is not to cover every adverse part of the curriculum. This inquiry is about the processes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I do not agree.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Mr Chair, we are trying to—

CHAIR: I know.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: We are setting a benchmark in regard to which we can assess the reliability of the evidence.

CHAIR: I understand that, but some of the questioning, for example, does Ms Wu know every other person's opinion in her service—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: She gave a very clear answer.

CHAIR: I think she is just associating with a headline, obviously, but she would not know the intimate views of every person with whom she aligns in schools. The question is a little bit of a grey area.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Mr Chair, you are running interference for a witness who does not need it, with respect. If she cannot answer the question—

CHAIR: I do not see it that way. The witness can answer the question.

Ms WU: May I just say though that in our group, yes, we do have a Christian majority.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: That was not my question.

Ms WU: Yes, I understand that, but that would be a question that is very much aligned with what we believe. If we could think of another area, like discuss another area of the curriculum, one where we have differing views, it is just that we are all a Christian subset and so we would tend to believe the same thing. It is not to say all home schoolers would do that.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: No, no.

Ms WU: That would be an unfair representation of home schooling and just because we are a Christian group.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Does your AP raise these issues with you? Do they raise the issue of whether you teach creationism as co-equal to evolution?

Ms WU: She has not specifically spoken to me about it, but she knows exactly what books I use and she reads through everything that I plan.

Dr JOHN KAYE: She is aware that you are teaching creationism as a scientific theory?

Ms WU: As a theory?

Dr JOHN KAYE: As a scientific theory?

Ms WU: She probably would.

CHAIR: You can take the question on notice, to be fair.

Dr JOHN KAYE: They can.

Ms WU: I cannot actually answer for her though.

Dr JOHN KAYE: No. Does she ask you or do you inform her that is what you are doing? Would the documentation you show her reveal that that is the case?

Ms WU: Yes, I believe it does.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What about you, Mrs Vanderkolk?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: I do not think that in any way we have hidden the things that we are teaching. It would be obvious to the things across all subject areas, the textbooks that we use and the things that we are explaining to our children. Nobody has ever asked me that in particular, but according to the list of things we are teaching I think it would be understood that we are presenting both views but we are presenting also our family's values.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Your AP would understand that, as part of the science, there are different ways you can present things. You could present creationism as a view, but you could also present it as a scientific theory. Do they understand that you are presenting it as a scientific theory?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: I can only say that they can see the books and things we are using and that that question has never been asked.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Mr Vanderkolk, was I correct when I heard you say when you answered a question on this topic that you were taught evolution as a scientific theory and you were given books to that effect?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: That is correct.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: The situation is that you have been taught evolution as a science, according to the curriculum, but your religious belief is in favour of creationism?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: That is correct.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Your personal religious belief?

Mr N. VANDERKOLK: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: I just want to clarify that so there cannot be a spin put on it out in the community. Your first recommendation supports an advisory body similar to that in Tasmania. Does that mean that HESAN has never been approached by BOSTES to be part of any formal consultative arrangement here in New South Wales?

Ms WU: No.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: It has never been put to you at all?

Ms WU: No.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: As it has never been put to you, you have never rejected such an idea for any reason because it has never been put to you in the first place, is that correct?

Ms WU: That is correct.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You are very proud of your children and what they have achieved in their life and you feel that home teaching certainly has not harmed them but, in fact, has helped them achieve what they have?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Yes, we believe it has been beneficial for them.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Jesse, you said that your dad was not really keen for you to come out of school. What kind of process did your family go through to make that important decision to leave school?

Mr GIBSON: I was not aware of most of the decisions because at the time I was just in the middle of year 1. So I was not a part of most of the discussions which were made. So I cannot answer that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you been told why you were?

Mr GIBSON: As I said, my favourite question was why, but it was never answered. I just found school less and less enjoyable. That is one of the reasons.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Your impression is that it was because of how you were going at school; the decision was made around your needs?

Mr GIBSON: That is my impression.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Based on what was happening to you?

Mr GIBSON: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You said you kind of missed your friends at first but you made lots of new friends?

Mr GIBSON: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How do you make new friends when you are having home education?

Mr GIBSON: Home schoolers regularly catch up for the mums to talk and for the kids to socialise, basically.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I do not have any personal experience of it. Think of me as someone not from Earth because I know nothing about this; I am completely fresh on it. How does that interaction occur? Is it kind of like a regular catch-up between friends or is this organised through the network? Do you do it at places where you can play and things like that? How does that work?

Mr GIBSON: HESAN once a month has a picnic on Friday at Gunnamatta Park. It starts at 12 o'clock and all members of HESAN if they can make it on that day will go and catch up together.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you have any opportunities for organised sport?

Mr GIBSON: I do swimming twice a week and gym once a week.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are they in local clubs and things like that?

Mr GIBSON: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Have you had those sorts of opportunities as well?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Like socialising, meeting up with people?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, chances to meet friends. For those of us who went to a mainstream school, that was our main way of meeting people I guess.

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: There are lots of different things, like a few of the things I mentioned before. There is drama, choir, debating, dance, all of those things. I can do that on Wednesdays. There is a lot of different activities also for sports and things. There are home school activities as well. I play netball, so you have your netball club.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is that with a local sporting club?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, my kids do not have school-based sport. They do it through the local club. It seems quite different these days; it was all at school when I was at school. Do you have friends that you hang out with on the weekend and things like that?

Ms T. VANDERKOLK: Yes because as well as that I have my church friends and I hang out with them and home school friends and things like that.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I travel a lot by airplane and have to get screened all the time as if I am some sort of terrorist, and I am not. A tiny minority of people are not doing the right thing by their kids with home schooling and there have been cases of that, which is what drives regulatory change. Mrs Vanderkolk, do you accept that there are those sorts of people, therefore, we do need to have regulation? Do you have any suggestions as to what is a good way of ensuring that those cases of doing the wrong thing in home education are addressed so that it does not have to have a negative impact on everyone in home schooling?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: I think we would also be concerned to hear of cases where children are not being looked after. We do understand that there are appropriate measures of registration. We would like to see measures that are just appropriate, which are really meaningful, which understand the nature of home education and where the paperwork that we might be involved in and so on is actually reflective of what we are doing rather than reflective of a school-based idea. Also, on top of that our children, as I have spoken about, are engaged in lots of social activities and interactions and in drama classes, which are run by home school groups.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What about the kids that are not getting that? I am sorry, I want to move on to the next point.

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What about the kids that are not getting that? Sorry, I want to move on. These kids have flourished, I accept all of that. We are worried about the kids who are not flourishing. What is a good system to deal with the problem?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: One of the registration things that we would be looking at as part of the independent body that we see as an important thing is that when you come to register, you would show what you are going to be doing in home schooling, but as well you could show the opportunities that you have got for social interaction.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What if the opportunities are not being given to the children? Then what do we do?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: That could be a requirement of registration. Under the Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council [THEAC] model, that is one of their requirements, that children are engaged.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Sorry to keep interrupting. Do you accept that someone needs to police that?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: Under a registration system, as under the THEAC model, you would be meeting with the parents and discussing things. They would also be able to show ways that their children will be involved in social opportunities.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What about the people who will not meet with the approved officers and will not produce their children or will not let them talk to their children? Do the approved officers need powers to ensure they are given the information they need to be assured that kids are getting these opportunities?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: I suppose the current system makes a lot of parents quite anxious to register. If the system was more supportive of parents so that they would come and discuss opportunities and things like that, more parents would be willing to discuss things. Another recommendation is that we have centres of excellence. We were thinking of a special location for a centre of excellence where kids could come and do things.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I hear what you are saying. I will keep making this comment: This is fantastic for the families who are doing it the right way, but we have to accept that there is a group—as I have to accept as a passenger on an aircraft—that there are people out there, unfortunately, who want to do the wrong thing. Every system has that group of people in it. The Board of Studies has this problem. They have a duty of care to those kids as well. Those situations have to be addressed properly. The regulation you are now reacting against is not targeting you but we have to target those families. Do you accept that problem?

Mrs M. VANDERKOLK: I suppose the families that are trying to be targeted are not, in a sense, coming forward because of the anxious system, but I think if they had a reason that would encourage them to register an incentive-involved—certain things are restricted from us now, but if they were given, in a sense, as the right of what other home school children would get, if there was more of a reason to register—at this stage it is not a reason to register, except for the anxiety that you are going to be facing.

CHAIR: That brings us to the end of this particular panel's session. Thank you one and all, particularly you young guns, as we say. You guys are a real credit. We wish you well in the future. No doubt you will be very successful. Thank you very much for your time and effort and your assistance in the inquiry. If you took any questions on notice, you need to answer within 21 days and we may give you further questions.

(The witnesses withdrew)

CARLA FERGUSON, President, Sydney Home Education Network, and

VELLY PASAS, Vice-President, Sydney Home Education Network, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: Ladies, welcome, and thank you for your participation in this inquiry. Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms FERGUSON: We both would. I will go first. My name is Carla Ferguson. I am the President of the Sydney Home Education Network, which is known as SHEN. I have been home educating my two children for six years. Every child has a right to a quality education and we understand that the Government has a responsibility to ensure a quality education for every child. Home education stands alongside institutional schools. It is an important choice for children to receive a quality education. We welcome the opportunity to work with the Government. SHEN is the peak home education support group in Sydney and the greater Sydney area. SHEN facilitates communication and interaction amongst home educators. SHEN is run exclusively by volunteers and we have approximately 250 families as members, which equates to roughly 650 children. SHEN plays an integral part in uniting the home education community and is a valuable first point of contact for families considering or commencing home education.

There are many events, excursions, classes and camps that are organised by the SHEN committee and individual members of SHEN. There is an exhaustive list of things that happen in the home education community. Examples are swimming and athletics carnivals, tickets to performances run by the education department at the Sydney Opera House, tickets to performances by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, school concerts, drama classes, business studies, science classes and workshops. The list goes on. By home educating our children we do a great service to the community. Not only do we educate and raise informed citizens, children who are part of society and contribute to society, we remove a burden from institutional schools, especially in terms of children with special needs. Home educators are constantly faced with having to deal with many misconceptions relating to home education. It is my hope that as a result of this inquiry there will be a better understanding of the real nature of home education and its many benefits to children and society. Thank you.

Ms PASAS: My name is Velly Pasas and I am the vice-president of the Sydney Home Education Network. I have been home educating for 10 years. I have two children in the public school system and two children who I home educate. Having children concurrently in two separate education systems has given me many insights into these different sectors. I find I am very rarely questioned about my decision to allow a child to go to a public school. However, I am constantly challenged on the issue of home education. This reflects a general misunderstanding in the community of what home education is and how a child learns outside a traditional school structure. Home education is a valid educational choice and I hope I can allay some of your concerns today and show you why home education is important to many families and why changes need to be made to the way it is administered.

In my 10 years of home educating, I have seen subtle changes in the administration of home education. These changes culminated in the 2013 information package. Its content and tone was significantly different from the previous versions. The 2013 information package, which was released last August, took a prescriptive approach to education and it sought to micromanage the learning process. Furthermore, there was no interaction with the home education community before the introduction of these changes. The official line from Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES], which the Minister for Education accepts, is that the changes were primarily made in relation to the introduction of the national curriculum. They claim that there were no changes made about the actual education process.

We would like to put on record yet again that the issue is not the national curriculum. The changes in the 2013 information package go significantly beyond a changing curriculum. It includes constant references to the educational program having to be delivered in the home by the parent. However, learning in a school is not limited to a physical place and to only one teacher, especially at a high school level. Why should these restrictions be placed on home educators? We believe that learning cannot be limited to a person and to a place. Furthermore, the New South Wales syllabuses are now considered to be the only course of study available. We acknowledge that the syllabuses are a valuable resource and can be used as guiding documents. However, we believe that curriculum from other sources can complement the New South Wales syllabuses and have a role to play in the educational program of a child. We also feel that it is unfair that home educated children are denied

educational opportunities available to children who attend public and private schools. These include the TVET courses and access to open high school.

The Sydney Home Education Network would like to make three recommendations to this inquiry. First, that a new system with a new independent body be established to oversee home education, based on the proven and successful Tasmanian Home Education Advisory Council. We believe this body should include a support function. Secondly, that the registration is managed by the aforementioned independent body. Thirdly, that home educators have equal access to all educational support services and educational opportunities available to public and private school students. Home education is an integral part of our education sector and it needs to be supported.

CHAIR: You talk about not having equal access to various things like school travel passes and TVET courses. Could you elaborate on that? An earlier witness said they were not even eligible for the concession card for schoolkids so could you just clarify that?

Ms PASAS: The child is entitled to a concession card until they turn 17. Once they turn 17 compulsory education ends in New South Wales. However, a lot of our children actually take on a year 11 and 12 workload. For example, my son is planning to go on to university but there is nothing that BOSTES or anyone can do to provide some sort of documentation that the child is in full-time study, so they are paying adult fares until they go to university. The other issues with open high school and TVET, I feel, are very important, particularly as my child got older. Open high school tends to be specialist distance education for languages. Children in both the public and the private systems can access open high school between year 9 and year 12. Our children cannot. TVET, which is a wonderful initiative by TAFE, is delivered either on the school grounds or on the TAFE campus but our children cannot participate. We believe that is fundamentally unjust and is discriminatory and we would like the inquiry to look at that issue.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Can't your children attend the TAFE that is delivering the course?

Ms PASAS: We are not allowed to do TVET courses.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: What prevents you?

Ms PASAS: If you want a specific—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: If you do not know the answer, please take it on notice?

Ms PASAS: I will try to take it on notice.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It is not a trick question. I am actually very interested in some of the barriers to the learning experience.

Ms PASAS: I would like to take that question on notice.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Ferguson, you referred to home schooling providing a service to society in that it would "remove a burden from institutional schools"—

Ms FERGUSON: Absolutely. I would like to give a personal example.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can I ask you a question: Do you think that schools, public schools in particular, think of children with special needs as burdens?

Ms FERGUSON: In a way I think they do and I think because their resources are so limited they have a handful of children whose needs they cannot meet.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Have you ever heard a public school teacher—

Ms FERGUSON: No.

Dr JOHN KAYE: —or a principal or an education administrator refer to any child as a burden?

Ms FERGUSON: No, I have not, but you can see how a school struggles with these children. I have personal experience there with my own son. They are a burden to the school. The school has so many things it needs to attend to. Although the teachers would not think that the child is a burden, they have such difficulty with that child in the classroom.

CHAIR: Can we just clarify this?

Ms FERGUSON: Certainly.

CHAIR: The child is not a burden, the resource is a burden, is that right?

Ms FERGUSON: Exactly. Thank you.

Dr JOHN KAYE: The child has high resource costs, is what you are saying?

Ms FERGUSON: Yes, that is right.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Good. I just wanted to be clear on that. You home school, do you?

Ms FERGUSON: I do.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How many children do you home school?

Ms FERGUSON: I have two children and they are both home schooled now.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What do you teach about the age of the Earth?

Ms FERGUSON: I am sorry. Could you repeat that, please?

Dr JOHN KAYE: What do you tell your children about the age of the Earth?

Ms FERGUSON: We follow what is in the curriculum. We do not follow the creation theory but again I do tell my children about the theories so they are aware of the different theories. They are aware of evolution, they are aware of creation and that they are theories.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You teach them as equally valid theories?

Ms FERGUSON: That is right. I tell them which one is the accepted line, the scientific line and I explain to them what the creation theory is as well so they have knowledge of both.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you put them on an equal footing?

Ms FERGUSON: I just tell them as it is.

Dr JOHN KAYE: "As it is" is a confusing expression here.

Ms FERGUSON: One is a scientific theory and one is the religious Christian theory. They can then, in their own time and when they are ready, make a judgement about what they agree with.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you teach them scientific theories as things they can agree with or disagree with?

Ms FERGUSON: I think everybody is entitled to an opinion. I teach them and then they can make their judgement about that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Ms Pasas, what about you? Did you say you have two children at home?

Ms PASAS: I have five children altogether, one is at university, two are in public schools and two I home school.

Dr JOHN KAYE: How old are the two that you are home schooling?

Ms PASAS: I am home schooling a child in year 5 and a child in year 10.

Dr JOHN KAYE: What do you teach those children about the age of the Earth?

Ms PASAS: It is an old Earth.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So how old is the Earth?

Ms PASAS: Science is not my forte. To be honest, we actually attend science classes—well, my children attend science classes. At a high school level I do not personally deliver the high school curriculum.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So where do they go to get science classes?

Ms PASAS: A home school science group run by a mother who is passionate about science. She is the one who has read the syllabus. She is actually using the national curriculum. She has read the national curriculum. She has written her lesson plans.

Dr JOHN KAYE: She is using the New South Wales syllabus, she has got her own syllabus or our own national curriculum?

Ms PASAS: No, the national curriculum on science, so it is the New South Wales—

Dr JOHN KAYE: There is a national curriculum but there is a New South Wales implementation and a New South Wales syllabus?

Ms PASAS: Yes, that is the one she uses.

Dr JOHN KAYE: She is using the New South Wales syllabus?

Ms PASAS: Yes. We are adamant that when I engage teachers that they teach the Board of Studies syllabus.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In your organisation are you aware of parents who teach young Earth creationism?

Ms FERGUSON: I am not personally, no.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is it something that is discussed at your meetings?

Ms FERGUSON: Curriculum usually does come up but that is not a conversation that I have been involved in.

Ms PASAS: Could I add to that? Generally when we are discussing curriculum we are not looking at the specifics. For example, we might be discussing a Charlotte Mason approach and what that would involve. We might be looking at specific programs, for example, Maths Online, and comparing that with other maths programs. We might be looking at the Sonlight curriculum.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you discuss pedagogy more than the content is what you are saying?

Ms PASAS: Yes, depending on the group and what needs they have. Generally if people are newer to home schooling they need a lot of information. As you move along you already have a lot of resources and a lot of information.

Dr JOHN KAYE: One of your recommendations is equal access to all educational support available to public and private schools. I presume you mean non-government schools there. Can you elaborate? Do you mean you want everything that public schools get and everything the private schools get or everything the private schools get? I am not sure what you mean? In your verbalisation of the recommendations you talked about wanting access. Can you be more specific about that?

Ms PASAS: What we are hearing as members of SHEN, particularly when we are fielding calls from new home educators, is that they need support, particularly those who are bringing their children out of the school system, whether that is a public or private school system, because of specific needs their child has. Within that system, the public or the private school system, they had access to specialised programs or they might have had access to different levels of support, shall we say, but once we move into the home education system that support is cut off.

Dr JOHN KAYE: For example, a child who has low functioning autism would get support at a public school of about \$8,000 a year. That child is taken out of that school. Would you expect that \$8,000 of public education funds to come to you?

Ms PASAS: Not necessarily, no.

CHAIR: It would be helpful.

Ms PASAS: It would be helpful but, to be honest, my preferred option is for support to be given, may be in the form of vouchers where they could then go to professionals.

Dr JOHN KAYE: So you want the monetary resource that goes into children in public education?

Ms PASAS: I think that is right or, at the bare minimum, the monetary resource that goes to a private school.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You would be aware, of course, that that would impose a significant cost on public education?

Ms PASAS: It depends which way you account for it, doesn't it? Are we talking about a child in the public school system or a child in the private school system and how it is funded?

Dr JOHN KAYE: You say there is a cost saving when you take a child out of a public school?

Ms PASAS: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: We had a doctor here before who was presumably going to earn \$150,000 or \$200,000 a year and was presumably going to pay \$50,000 or \$60,000 a year in tax, and if she gives up her work we lose \$50,000 or \$60,000 in tax. That is not much saving for us as a government.

Ms PASAS: With all due respect, I think a woman or a man has a right to decide whether they want to go into the paid workforce.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Of course, absolutely. I agree with you.

Ms PASAS: I do not think the State has a right to my tax-paying mum.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I was exploring your proposition that there is a saving to the taxpayer.

Ms PASAS: To me, that does not come into the equation.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Sorry, you put to us that there is a saving to the taxpayers by taking a child out of a public school or a private school?

Ms PASAS: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: I put to you that there is also a loss to the taxpayers in tax revenue that the person who is delivering the home schooling provides?

Ms FERGUSON: But that is not always the case. Some parents are stay-at-home parents, period, whether they home educate or not, so I do not really think that is a strong argument.

Dr JOHN KAYE: But in some cases there will be a loss to the system?

Ms FERGUSON: In some cases there would be a loss to the system.

Ms PASAS: In my personal case it was not. When I began home schooling I was not working so there was no loss.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I direct my attention to your submission. You stress essentially two motivations towards home schooling—special needs children that are not adequately catered for in the mainstream schooling system and also gifted children. Did those two motivations lead you personally into home schooling or are there some other philosophical or other motivation?

Ms FERGUSON: My motivation is because of my eldest son. He has a learning difficulty. We worked within the institutional school system for four years.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: The public school system?

Ms FERGUSON: A private Catholic school; it was the local Catholic school, so it was after much frustration—

CHAIR: Sorry, by "private Catholic", was that a low-income private Catholic or a higher level—

Dr JOHN KAYE: Parochial systemic Catholic?

Ms FERGUSON: "Systemic" is the word I am looking for.

CHAIR: The reason I wanted that clarified was the resource capacity of the school.

Ms FERGUSON: If I can clarify: my son is not classified as special needs; he has a learning difficulty, so without the special needs he did not receive any funding and that was made clear to us by the principal of the school. We sought outside help; we went to see an education consultant and the advice was really that my son needed one-on-one; he needed to go back to basics and that cannot be accommodated within the school.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Sure. Ms Pasas, what was your entry into home schooling?

Ms PASAS: Mine is similar. When my first two children turned five I enrolled in our local public school. We knew that my third child was going to struggle. He had been receiving speech therapy and occupational therapy from a very young age. We still enrolled him in our local school. We got to the end of the year and I could see he was struggling academically. In terms of socialising he actually had a lot of friends; that was never an issue. I remember getting to the end of the year and asking the teacher, "What can I do? How can I help him? I can still remember to this day, even though it has been 10 years, she opened up this big book. She showed me in one column the date and then "Michael refused to read to me". They are the home readers they send down in kindergarten.

She had faithfully documented that for 1½ terms. I was picking my son up every day. I was asking, "How is he? How is he?"—never a word. I said, "Okay. What can I do to help him?" She gave me a lot of advice. She gave me an intensive program for me to administer over the January school holidays and then onwards into year one. I looked at it and all I could see was that I am clearly being expected to teach my child how to read. After discussing it with my husband we decided that if I am going to teach my child to read I am doing it at nine o'clock in the morning; I am not doing it at four o'clock. It was the best decision of our life. It changed his future. To me home education has the ability to change a child's future. That is not why we are home schooling now though. We caught him up within a couple of years and we did not send our daughters to school initially because we were enjoying the home educating experience; the home journey.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Amongst SHEN's membership, is this the typical experience that leads them into home schooling?

Ms FERGUSON: It is a real mix. People have many different motivations.

Ms PASAS: We don't keep statistics so it is not possible. The closest you will get is the HEA survey but, again, not everybody completed that.

Ms FERGUSON: I have found that more and more professional families are coming to home education because their children are not having a successful education in an institutional school.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: When you say "professional" you mean tertiary educated people?

Ms FERGUSON: Absolutely.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I am talking about the underlying motivations. For example, we have heard that some people have described themselves as refugees from the schooling system because their children are not being adequately catered for and other people have talked about an underpinning religious or particular humanistic educational philosophy. What is your membership inspired by? Is it any one of those?

Ms PASAS: It could be all of them.

Ms FERGUSON: As Velly said it is a real mix, but there are an increasing number of people coming through with children that have been taken out of the institutional school system because the system is not meeting their needs, whether they have learning difficulties or they be gifted and talented.

Ms PASAS: We are not a religious organisation.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Most people are not able to inform the Committee as to even a rough hallmark; it is all in the abstract.

Ms PASAS: I think it also depends on which support groups you go to as well because like attracts like. Even in the school system your friends tend to be very similar to you and also in your social environment outside work. I can say from the social groups I attend that in about half of them it is because there were issues in the school, not necessarily learning difficulties but the rates of bullying are also on the increase as well. Some parents want to take their children out for a couple of years, build up that resilience and then think about their options as well.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: On page 12 of your submission you complain about the removal of your organisation as a support contact in the 2013 information package. Can you tell the Committee why that happened?

Ms FERGUSON: I have no idea. Velly, do you have any idea? There was no notification, no consultation.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Have you made any inquiries of the department as to why that happened?

Ms PASAS: We did write a letter protesting and they said they will include us in the next information package.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: But you were included previously, is that right?

Ms PASAS: Always. The first we found out about it was when we read the information package.

CHAIR: On page 11 of your submission you say, "SHEN objects to the content and intent of the 2013 Information Package and associated procedural changes. These have the effect of placing multiple obstacles in the way of parents who choose to home educate their children, rather than helping and supporting them. The changes do not demonstrate an understanding of home education, but seek to impose an inflexible, cumbersome, prescribed 'school-at-home' model. This model is inappropriate and unworkable for most families." Is that feedback from just a few people or has virtually the whole organisation drawn that conclusion?

Ms PASAS: We have received a lot of feedback. We have received phone calls, emails and when we have gone to our support groups or events organised by SHEN after the release of the 2013 information pack the talk in the home educating community was: Is this real? Is this what they mean? Do they really mean what they say?

Dr JOHN KAYE: Where were they getting their information from?

Ms PASAS: From the information package.

Dr JOHN KAYE: This was their reading of the information package?

Ms PASAS: "Their reading" meaning the home educator's reading?

Dr JOHN KAYE: Yes, the individual home schoolers.

Ms PASAS: Yes.

Dr JOHN KAYE: They were reading the package and this is what they were saying?

Ms PASAS: Yes.

CHAIR: Or were they finding it really hard to fill out the information requirements?

Ms PASAS: When we initially started reading it was only going to impact on those who were due for registration straightaway—say, for example, with me I have just under two years so it was not going to impact me. So for those people who were due for registration in the next few months they were very worried, they were trying to work out how to get their paperwork and a lot of them were putting in a lot of hours on that paperwork—

CHAIR: Two hundred hours?

Ms PASAS: I am trying to get my year 10 certificate of completion and I am already up to 70 hours so I can believe that. Unfortunately, paperwork is a part of our society. I am happy to do paperwork and I do paperwork, particularly when I plan and program and all of that. That to me has value but when I have to do paperwork that does not have value it concerns us.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I direct your attention to page 10 of your submission. Without in any way discounting that parents are genuinely motivated to do the best thing for their children, and obviously parents who seek to home school will apply themselves diligently and to the best of their skills, would you accept that the range of abilities and aptitude in relation to home schooling would vary markedly across parents and that there has to be some regulatory or other mechanism to ensure that quality educational outcomes are occurring in the home schooling sector?

Ms FERGUSON: I would accept that but on the other hand I would say that having a qualification does not mean that you are going to be a great teacher. Some teachers are really brilliant and some are just really mediocre. I do not think you need that qualification to teach.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: That is true but teachers can be disciplined if they are not meeting certain standards. In both the private and public systems there are accountability measures for poor performing teachers.

Ms FERGUSON: Certainly.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: But from my understanding of the way the home schooling sector works there is no real quality assurance that the parents who no doubt are genuinely motivated are actually up to snuff in being able to teach. You would accept that teaching is a craft and a skill, would you not?

CHAIR: It is a gift.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It is also a craft; you can learn it.

CHAIR: Nursing is the same. You can get some nurses who know how to nurse but it is a real gift.

Ms FERGUSON: Absolutely. I have Googled what makes a good teacher and everything that came up was about the passion and the desire, it had nothing to do with the qualification. I accept what you say. Parents who do decide to home educate do that with a lot of thought. They do not take it lightly. I think they weigh up

whether they have the capacity or not. I have been in conversations with parents who have said, "I do not think I can do it anymore. I have to send little Johnny back to school."

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: What happens in the situation where the APs form the view that the parents are just not capable of meeting the standards? Should they be able to continue home schooling?

Ms PASAS: I think the community can actually be quite assured that quality of the education is good for the simple reason that the maximum registration that we can receive is two years. So when the AP comes and they look at our program, they look at our work samples, they look at everything, if they are happy with what we have done and what we are planning on doing and they are happy with our programming, our planning and our ability to teach, the maximum is two years. If they are not happy, it will be a year. The first time you seek registration for home education it is a maximum of one year. If they are not happy, it will be three months or six months. I actually think we can be more assured in the home education community than I can say for my children in the public school system where they are definitely not assessed every two years like we are.

CHAIR: The 2013 statistics show a 600 per cent increase on three monthly registrations so that means a lot of people are doing as well as they probably were under the 2011 package?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Just to clarify, we have gone from seven to 49. When you say 600 per cent—

CHAIR: Keep going across to your other finger, what does the percentage say there?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: That is 600 per cent but we are talking seven to 49 out of 3,705.

CHAIR: A 600 per cent increase.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes, but I just want to put it in that context.

Ms PASAS: Can I answer your question?

CHAIR: Yes.

Ms PASAS: It is not because parents are not doing it; it is because there has been a change in the registration process. For example, one of the big things that I object to is—I would like to show the Committee something. This is what my daughters been doing at a science class. My daughter is in year five. This is why I don't teach science. This actually is not considered learning any more. I was approved under the 2011 package, I am okay until 2015. I can't count this as learning because it was not delivered in my home and I was not the teacher. So now if I was to submit my program to the AP today they are going to say: science out, public speaking out, economics out.

All these learnings or curriculum that is based on the New South Wales Board of Studies—because I tend to use Board of Studies as opposed to any other curriculum—is no longer learning. Now I could easily drop down from two years—which I have been consistently receiving and being told that I am providing a great program to the extent that my AP has suggested that I go into teaching to deliver this program in a school system—to her looking and saying, "I can't see learning happening." That is one of the very big issues which the Minister is not addressing and BOSTES is not addressing and we would like the inquiry to really look at appropriate registration and to recognise learning.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How many students does that teacher have?

Ms PASAS: Eight students.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is she a teacher?

Ms PASAS: No, that is probably her advantage. She is absolutely passionate about science, her knowledge is phenomenal. She is the best teacher we have ever had to be honest and we have had a variety of teachers.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Sorry, did you say she was a teacher?

Ms PASAS: No.

Dr JOHN KAYE: She is not a qualified teacher?

Ms PASAS: No.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You have a group of students together in front of her?

Ms PASAS: Yes, and she can deliver.

Dr JOHN KAYE: In her home?

Ms PASAS: She actually teaches in her home because she likes to do a lot of hands-on learning and a lot of experiments, so she spends the morning preparing and setting everything up for the children. Any child would love to be in her class.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How many subjects do you have other teachers for and how many do you deliver in your own home?

Ms PASAS: For me personally?

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes.

Ms PASAS: This term my daughter is doing public speaking and geography outside the home, my son is doing geography and public speaking as well this term. That changes term to term.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do they both have the same geography teacher?

Ms PASAS: Actually they do, yes. She is very good. She is one of the few people that can actually go through the different ages. Even when we engage dip Ed qualified teachers we do have an expectation that they can teach primary and high school.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: When you say "we engage" teachers, is this being done through the association?

Ms PASAS: No, this is something I do on my own.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So the "we" is?

Ms PASAS: We as in the "royal we", as in me.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: As in the family?

Ms PASAS: Yes.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So there is not a group of parents who are doing this together?

Ms PASAS: We did that in the past. That is how we actually began. We began as a group of parents and it makes sense to do that particularly with HSIE, science and technology. I personally find that English and maths should be on a one-to-one basis. Once you move to HSIE they are fun, they are great to do in a group, there are so many benefits in doing that in a group setting. Initially what we did, we ran co-ops and mums would rotate and would teach different subjects. As the years passed we felt that we would like to not teach, take a break from teaching the HSIE because we do invest very heavily in the literacy and maths subjects. I try to make them as interactive and as interesting as possible. Lately we have been engaging a teacher for that subject but having said that this term I am also doing rainforests with my child at home.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you take school holidays like everyone else?

Ms PASAS: Of course. I do pupil free days too. My children are in a public school system and if they are not in the classroom, I am not in the classroom.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Your submission refers to the fact that a lot of families filter in and out of the school system, particularly to finish. Is it common, for example, for kids to be home schooled in primary school and then go to high school or maybe do years 11 and 12 at high school? Can you give me a feel of how that roughly works?

Ms PASAS: I think we can generally say that there are more home educated children in primary school. What we find is as they move to high school parents start to look for other options as well—definitely as they move to upper high school more and more children will move into either the traditional school system or maybe into formalised TAFE. It tends to change. What you will find is that it is growing particularly at the primary school level and then it sort of tapers off as they get older. In terms of when they enter home schooling it depends. In my case we began because of issues with my son but with my daughters they began from kindergarten because we knew that is what we wanted for them. One of my daughters finished year 6 at home and then she sat the selective high school test and was given a position. I encouraged her to go. I said to her, "Try it out and see what you think." She is enjoying the school so she is staying there. What I find is that home school parents are actually open to choice and if a child wishes to explore that school option they can.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Congratulations on the exam result. I know that is a very competitive exam.

Ms PASAS: Thank you. I felt very proud. I have also got a NAPLAN back for my year 5 so I feel very proud today.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Are there any examples of people part schooling and part home schooling or is that flexibility not available?

Ms FERGUSON: That is not allowed in the school system. However, when we first considered home education with my son we asked the school if they would allow partial home schooling and they reluctantly agreed to trial it for a term. It actually worked very well. My son was very happy. In the morning he would do the literacy and the numeracy with me, the areas where he was way behind, and then he would go to school at lunchtime for a play and then do the art, craft, sport and music—all the activities they have in the afternoon at school. He had the best of both worlds. It worked very well, however, we knew the school would not agree to an extension of that.

CHAIR: What period of time was it and what year was he in?

Ms FERGUSON: The beginning of year three. He was eight at that time and he had already repeated kindergarten at the school. It was one term at the beginning of year three.

CHAIR: Mix and match can work?

Ms FERGUSON: It can work. There was a defining moment for us because my daughter was still at the same school and my son and I went into the school to pick up my daughter and he said, "Look, mummy, my class is on the oval. They are playing sport. I really miss them." I thought have I made a mistake. I said to him, "Look, if I have made a mistake you can go back. Do you want to go back?" He said, "No, mummy. I miss my friends but I do not want to go back." He was happy to accept that. The choice was his to home school and he was happy to accept that was the trade-off he had to make. However, after that we made lots of terrific friends in the home schooling community. The social aspect for him improved greatly because he did not have that stress and feeling of inadequacy in the school system. The social aspect was not anything that we needed to consider.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you think that it could have been beneficial or that there might be families who would like to have a balance of some classes of formal schooling?

Ms FERGUSON: Absolutely.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am thinking about kids with special needs such as a gift as a fabulous young athlete who needs to tour. I have been surprised how many are getting home schooling but there is no flexibility with the school to pursue that.

Ms FERGUSON: That's right. The home schooling allows for the child to develop their talent in their area, if it is sport or music, and then you can do the literacy and the numeracy and the other subjects, you can fit that around the commitments of the child.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: In terms of that lack of flexibility, do you understand that to be a rule?

Ms FERGUSON: Yes, it is a rule. I believe it is in the latest information package that partial home schooling is not allowed.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is an all or nothing approach.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It is the legislation. It is the definition of home schooling in section 3 of the Act that makes it impossible. Home schooling has to happen in the child's home.

Ms FERGUSON: I believe it is permitted in Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

CHAIR: Thank you for your participation in this inquiry. There may be questions on notice and you have 21 days to reply. There may be further questions that members will put to you given your exhaustive presentation. The Committee will help you with that if you need help. Thank you for your input. It is so important. Hopefully through this inquiry we can do that which enriches our children's education.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(Short adjournment)

ANNA UREN, Relieving Research Officer, NSW Teachers Federation, and

LENORE HANKINSON, Industrial Officer, NSW Teachers Federation, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Good afternoon, would either of you like to make an opening statement?

Ms UREN: In its nearly 100-year history the Federation has always been active in fighting for quality education for children. The union is driven strongly by its belief in the right of all children to receive a high quality education irrespective of the circumstances or decisions of their parents. In speaking here this afternoon I can only re-stress the key points in our written submission. Firstly, that all children have a fundamental human right to a quality education and to be in a safe and secure environment. If parents do choose to educate their children at home then we believe the State still has a responsibility to ensure that this right is being upheld. Registration requirements must allow the State to meet these obligations.

If those registration requirements are onerous or parents find them difficult to meet then it is not necessarily the State's responsibility to make that easier or to provide support or training for parents to meet the registration requirements, particularly if those steps would expose children to risk of educational neglect or drain resources from the State's primary responsibility, which is public education. Home schooling advocates are certainly free to develop their own support mechanisms and obviously they have done so. Hardly a day goes by when education does not appear in the news media at the moment.

Everyone has a vested interest in the quality of education of Australian children and the Teacher Accreditation Act has been around in New South Wales for 10 years and other states and territories have similar legislation. In New South Wales the Great Teaching, Inspired Learning Policy is seeking to further cement high quality teaching. These measures recognise that teaching is a highly complex and demanding role and the State has a role to play in supporting and promoting high quality teaching in schools. We believe that there needs to be quality assurance mechanisms for all students whether they are at home or at school.

The Federation asks that the Committee consider very carefully the rights of children in this inquiry. It is in nobody's interest to have children exposed to the risk of educational neglect or abuse. Teachers are among the most likely to report abuse to the authorities simply by virtue of the amount of contact they have with children and young people. The Federation is not asserting that children being home schooled are necessarily at greater risk of experiencing abuse, but the fact that they are not in regular contact with teachers would only put them at risk of any abuse that did exist going unnoticed or unreported for longer.

The Federation acknowledges the many submissions from home schooling parents who wrote of positive experiences and educational outcomes for their children but we also note that a significant number of those parents who wrote submissions were qualified teachers themselves. The success of the few cannot be seen as a guarantee of the success of the many. We believe that there needs to be measures in place to assure that the many are able to achieve the same success as those who have written submissions talking of positive experiences. While the Education Act makes home schooling a legal option, the State's main responsibility is the provision of an adequately resourced public education system. The Federation's position, based on the experiences of many thousands of teachers over generations, is that this is the best way to meet children's educational needs.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Thank you for your introductory remarks. I also thank the Teachers Federation for its submission. We have heard from a number of home schooling organisations and parents today that the imposition of a requirement to teach to the Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards [BOSTES] syllabuses is an imposition on their capacity to home school and to deliver education in a way that suits their children. From your experience as teachers and representatives of teachers do you believe it is true that the syllabuses constrain the capacity to deliver quality education?

Ms UREN: Certainly not. There are a number of points that I would make. The first is the process that goes into developing the syllabuses. There is an enormous amount of consultation that goes on. They are developed to ensure that they are stage appropriate and intellectually rigorous so that they provide challenging learning opportunities but also that they can accommodate a vast range of ability within them. As an individual I taught for a while in distance education. In that time I was involved in making a huge range of modifications to curriculum in order to accommodate the needs of a very diverse group of students who were unable to attend a

face-to-face school for a number of reasons. That was sometimes done individually and sometimes collegially in a group of teachers. We found that we were able to make modifications to a whole range of circumstances to be able to meet the different circumstances of those children.

Dr JOHN KAYE: While you were making those modifications you were doing so within the context of the syllabi?

Ms UREN: Absolutely. Obviously as teachers within the public education system, although not exclusively within the public education system, that is our starting point: We have to meet the requirements of the syllabuses. Any modifications that we made always continued to meet those requirements. There are opportunities to vary the depth and look at particular aspects of content. There are opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in different ways. That can be done verbally, in writing or through action. There are lots of different ways for those students to be able to demonstrate their learning. There can be a different amount of written or visual content depending on the student's capacity to take on board those different styles of learning materials.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Is there flexibility for sequencing and staging of information and material? If a student, for example, in a home schooling environment showed an interest in a particular direction within the syllabus could you adjust the learning program to meet that interest?

Ms UREN: There is certainly capacity for modifications. The syllabuses are done in stages and there is a lot of research into those particular stages. They are not done by schooling years. It is not a kindergarten curriculum, a year one curriculum or a year two curriculum but it is done in stages of learning. Those stages are typically two years in length but how you work within those stages is quite flexible. There are certainly very small schools which would operate with multiple year groups and often multiple stages in a single classroom. Those teachers are able to develop programs according to those sorts of circumstances as well.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You mentioned in your written submission and in your opening remarks the Teachers Federation's support for a number of mechanisms that have improved teaching quality.

Ms UREN: Yes. In particular I would not say that they were mechanisms that necessarily improved teacher quality but they are mechanisms designed to assure and regulate—perhaps is a better word—teacher quality. The Teachers Federation has been supportive of those mechanisms provided that they are properly resourced. The main ones are around the Teacher Accreditation Act and the Great Teaching, Inspired Learning Policy. Under the Teacher Accreditation Act in New South Wales teachers are accredited against a set of standards. They are national standards. They have been agreed to at the State and Federal levels. They cover a whole range of aspects of what a teacher does. That is more involved than just the curriculum. That is a part of ensuring the quality of the education that students in schools receive.

The Great Teaching, Inspired Learning Policy is a Department of Education policy but one that the Federation has been very supportive of. There are a number of aspects to that about improving and regulating teacher pre-service education. That is ensuring that when teachers enter the profession they are adequately prepared to enter the classroom to be able to do all of those aspects of a teacher's job that are contained within the standards. They are also about providing additional release time. These things are things that have been resourced and funding has been allocated to provide additional release time for beginning teachers. They are also about promoting the sharing of good professional practice so that in the public education system, which is a system of over 2,000 schools, those teachers are able to share what works through professional networks. That enables the quality of teaching to be improved across the whole system because we are able to learn from one another.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Do you think it is appropriate that similar mechanisms be applied to parents who are home schooling?

Ms UREN: Do you mean a set of standards and so on?

Dr JOHN KAYE: Yes.

Ms UREN: The Federation would say that there absolutely needs to be some quality assurance mechanisms in place. Whether it is appropriate that they are the same set of standards I do not know. We have never looked at the standards in that context to be able to assess whether we think that would be appropriate.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are you a new scheme teacher?

Ms UREN: Yes, I am.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Can you tell the Committee about the hoops that you jumped through to become a teacher? How many years of university did you do?

Ms UREN: I first completed a bachelor of arts with honours, which took four years at university. I worked for a little while and then returned to do a two-year Masters of Teaching program. That is six years in total.

Dr JOHN KAYE: When you joined the teaching service you then had to go through a four-year accreditation process.

Ms UREN: It was very early on in the implementation. Initially the Department was simply aligning the teacher accreditation process with the pre-existing teaching certificate. I was appointed as a permanent teacher in my first year. That typically happens after the first year of teaching. After one year of teaching I was assessed against that set of standards. When I graduated I was at the graduate level. There are four levels: graduate, proficient, highly accomplished and lead. People have up to five years to be assessed as proficient. I did that after one year, but teachers have up to five years to do it.

CHAIR: That is because you are teaching a lot of other people's children.

Ms UREN: It is true that I do not have 300 children, but I may also be teaching my own children at some point.

CHAIR: My point is that you have gone through that accreditation process to earn the right to teach a whole range of children. However, home schooling often involves a mum or dad, or both, taking on the education of their own child. They would not be expected to do 15 years of education training to have the privilege of teaching their own children.

Ms HANKINSON: We would say that every child deserves a quality teacher.

CHAIR: I understand. I have said publicly that you do not need a licence to be a parent—you have a child and take it home—

Dr JOHN KAYE: The point is that it now takes six years of study at university and four years of accreditation to become a teacher. It is effectively a 10 year qualification.

Ms UREN: It could take that long, but it could be done more quickly. At the moment, the minimum recognised degree takes four years. Obviously I have done more than that.

Dr JOHN KAYE: It has been said that when a child goes to a public school there is a large number of teachers and other students who are observing that child. That means that if something is going wrong in terms of welfare or educationally there is a much better chance that someone will pick it up and do something compared with a child being seen by only one parent.

Ms UREN: That was covered in the point I raised earlier. It is not our assertion that something is necessarily more likely to go wrong, but it is more likely that if something does go wrong it will go unnoticed. Teachers are the biggest reporters of concerns about welfare simply because of the amount of contact they have with children and young people. Because teachers are around them for 40 weeks a year, six hours a day they see more.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Are teachers are now professionally developed in child welfare?

Ms UREN: Yes. Training is undertaken regularly in schools about mandatory reporting and child protection. If specific issues arise with individual students in terms of their needs or circumstances then training might be organised in a school.

CHAIR: Sadly some youths in large schools have taken their lives. How do teachers process and cope with that? How does the federation help them? One would hope there is safety in numbers. As you said, teachers are doing all the right things and watching for all the signs. However, sadly some young people, either indirectly because of social media or because of bullying, are taking their lives. How does the Federation deal with that situation? What sorts of supports are available?

Ms UREN: I am thinking about how to answer the question.

CHAIR: You can take it on notice. How do your members cope with that? As Dr Kaye said, there are eyes everywhere and you monitor these kids, but suddenly they kill themselves and no-one saw it coming. What sort of support and professional training is provided? How do teachers cope?

Ms HANKINSON: Are you talking about critical incidents?

CHAIR: Suicide, sadly.

Ms HANKINSON: Critical incidents can cover a range of student behaviours and things that happen in a school. Schools have a welfare structure and outside resources such as school counsellors. The employer also provides counselling to employees. The union provides welfare officers for members who are experiencing difficulties.

CHAIR: Do you have welfare officers?

Ms HANKINSON: Yes.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Does the federation have a philosophical position of being opposed to home schooling?

Ms UREN: The Federation does not have a specific policy on home schooling. It has a number of policies that emphasise that our position that for the vast majority of students the most effective way of delivering education and realising their right to a quality education is through comprehensive public schools.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I understand that; I can read page 3 of the submission. However, I detect running throughout the submission a scepticism about the notion of home schooling and its regulation.

Ms UREN: The Federation does not have a specific policy on home schooling because our interest is in public education.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: That is your main focus.

Ms UREN: Yes. Home schooling would be the most private of private education.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Of course.

Dr JOHN KAYE: At least it is not publicly subsidised.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Yet. You said in answer to questions from Dr Kaye that your organisation has not turned its mind to the issue of how society could ensure quality assurance in home schooling in terms of educational outcomes.

Ms UREN: No. Our position would be that if parents want to home school because the public education system is not meeting their child's needs then we should be appropriately funding and resourcing the public education system to be able to meet those needs.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I am glad you raised that because a number of parents cite difficulties experienced by their children not only in the public school system but also in the Catholic system and other nongovernment systems as the reason for undertaking home schooling. That is not to be critical of those systems, but their child had a learning or social difficulty that was not for one reason or another able to be dealt with in the school. You would appreciate that schools have limited resources and teachers have many students and they cannot give every child all the time and attention that they need. If someone has greater needs they

might be overlooked. It is not a criticism of the school system, but there must be circumstances in which the system is simply not able to provide the level of resourcing and attention that the individual student needs.

Ms UREN: I raise a couple of points. First, I draw attention to the Federation's very active support of and campaigning for the Gonski funding model, which provides very specific loadings around additional student need. If it were fully implemented it would see a significant injection of funds that would be directed specifically towards students with additional education needs. Secondly, the public education system has a variety of educational settings. Access to those settings is designed to provide education for students who have needs that are beyond the capacity of mainstream settings to provide. That includes distance education. Some of the enrolment categories include, obviously, geographic isolation but also vocational talents. That involves young people who are particularly talented in the performing arts or sports and who are engaged in those activities for a large part of the school day. That provides them with an opportunity to access an education. It also covers students in juvenile detention facilities and students who have a mental illness or other health issues.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: You mentioned distance education. We heard today that some home schooling parents would like their children to be able to access distance education for at least some subjects. However, that is prevented, presumably by the education system. Do you think that would be fair?

Ms UREN: Distance education is obviously more expensive to provide than mainstream classroom education. When I was teaching in distance education I would typically have responsibility for between 50 and 80 students, although not on my own. I am a high school teacher and there would be other teachers with responsibility for other subject areas. However, in a mainstream school I could have responsibility for between 200 or 300 students. Obviously it is more expensive to provide distance education. I do not think it would be an appropriate use of public money to make it available for anyone who wanted it just because they wanted it. It is designed as an important part of the equitable provision of public education. It ensures that students who would suffer a significant educational disadvantage if they were to attend a mainstream school are still able to access education.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: At least one submission made the point that home schooled children are not able to access TVET courses, Open High School, the school sports program or the hospital schools program. These are available to children not only in the government system but also in the nongovernment system. They then draw the inference that it is unfair that they are available to private school students but not to their home schooled students. Does the Federation have a position on that or would you like to take that question on notice?

Ms UREN: The Federation does not have a position on it.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I would understand that you have no position.

Ms UREN: We would not necessarily be inclined to develop a position. I can take the question on notice, but the response may well be that we still have no position.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: That is fine. As you said, your focus is mainly on what happens in the public school system, resourcing and accreditation.

Ms UREN: Obviously we are focused on what happens in public education. However, the union is driven very strongly by a belief in the right of all children to a quality education. We see that as being inextricably linked to the provision of public education.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: It may be that your organisation does not have a view on my next question. It has been stated in some submissions that home schooling parents feel that it is not equitable that they must now adhere to the New South Wales syllabus when private schools can depart from it. I do not know whether that proposition is correct.

Ms UREN: No it is not. It certainly is part of the registration process for private schools that they have to demonstrate that they are delivering the BOSTES syllabuses.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: So when we receive submissions from organisations and individual home schooling parents that make that assertion, that is just wrong as a matter of fact and private schools do not have to comply?

Ms UREN: Yes. Obviously, BOSTES would be best placed to answer that question, but certainly.

CHAIR: What about faith schools with a particular part of the curriculum dealing with faith? How are they excused or exempted from that curriculum?

Ms UREN: Are you talking about in public schools?

CHAIR: Faith-based schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: Religious schools.

CHAIR: Do they have to provide curriculum plus more?

Ms UREN: Yes. Again, as a representative of public education I may not be the best person to ask.

CHAIR: I am just asking because we have had some questions about it.

Ms HANKINSON: With respect, we are not apologists for private schools.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You cannot take faith into science. You can teach faith outside but you cannot corrupt the science curriculum with other things.

Ms UREN: Yes. Those syllabuses exist and then any religious education would exist outside of those existing syllabuses.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: I know you would agree that bullying in schools is an horrific thing for a child, especially a young child. It goes on in government and non-government schools. Despite all the programs and the good intentions of teachers, it is an ongoing problem. Nothing is worse for a child than to go through their school years suffering constant bullying and then instead of looking back on those school years as happy years of their life, they look on them as years of misery, no matter how well their academic achievements. Do you agree that in such situations home schooling certainly can go a long way in many instances to avoid that situation? If there were no home schooling there would be a scarred child. Would you not agree that those kinds of situations exist?

Ms UREN: No.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: You do not agree—

Ms UREN: I am not suggesting that individuals should continue to be exposed to bullying, by any means. Yes, it occurs; there is bullying in workplaces.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Yes.

Ms UREN: There is bullying, no doubt, in this building.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: But we are talking about home schooling.

Ms UREN: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Not the workplace.

Ms UREN: Yes.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: What I am saying is that despite all the programs and the best intentions, it is going to go on—it always has and it always will. We are talking about now, not what will happen in 10 years with new programs.

Ms UREN: Okay.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: We are talking about young children now. They are getting scarred and will leave school thinking of their school years as a living hell, even though they might have great academic achievements. You are saying that you do not agree that in some situations a child can be with their mother, their parents, in home schooling and avoid that? You do not agree that that would be an advantage?

Ms UREN: Sorry, I think perhaps you have misunderstood my "No."

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Right.

Ms UREN: Okay. What I mean is that it should not be used as a solution to the problem of bullying. The existence of home schooling should not be the solution.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: No, but it is the solution for that child's bullying, not generally. It is a solution for that child's bullying.

Ms HANKINSON: I think Ms Uren has said already that there are a number of alternatives and very different, diverse situations where—

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Yes, solutions.

Ms HANKINSON: Yes, like distance education. Some children choose that. However, our schools—

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: And home schooling.

Ms HANKINSON: —have rigorous student welfare programs.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Yes.

Ms HANKINSON: We have anti-bullying programs. To just remove a child whenever there is some sort of conflict is not teaching those lifelong skills of conflict resolution and dispute resolution that will enhance that child's ability to cope later in life with any sort of anxiety or social phobia.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: So you do not concede that parents should be able to take their child out and have home teaching to avoid a living hell for that child of bullying in the school, which might well take place despite all the good intentions of the school? Do you concede that in many instances that might be a better solution than the child remaining in that school?

Ms UREN: The Federation's position would be that if a school is unable to deal with an issue of bullying, then that constitutes the fact that the school is inadequately resourced to be able to do so. The Federation's position is always around ensuring that the programs that exist within schools to deal with bullying are properly resourced because not every child will have a parent who is capable of doing that.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: But there are people—

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: Point of order: The Hon. David Clarke, in his enthusiasm, is speaking over the witness.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: That is right. I am also thinking of the time.

CHAIR: Allow the witness to answer.

Dr JOHN KAYE: You asked a very complex question. She is giving an extremely good answer.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: It was a very straightforward question actually.

Ms UREN: Where was I up to?

CHAIR: Resourcing the school.

Ms UREN: Not every child will be able to be removed.

The Hon. DAVID CLARKE: Agreed.

Ms UREN: So as a result, the system needs to be able to take care of those children.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I want to take a slightly different view. It seems that it is almost as if we have a school system and the suggestion seems to be that home schooling is some sort of a poor reflection on the school system. From many of the submissions and those to whom we are talking, people actually are doing it for a positive reason. In fact, many of them are teachers themselves. Do you have any thoughts about why so many of the people making the submissions are teachers?

Ms UREN: Obviously, somebody who is a qualified teacher will be confident to be able to deliver education in the home because they have done it in a school.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Yes. They have been qualified to teach in a school but for their children—being qualified teachers they are very well placed to do it—they have opted to do it in the home. Should we necessarily see that as a slight or a negative thing about the school system or is it possible that that family just decided, "This is a journey we would like to take our kids on"? It is not an anti-school thing; it is a positive thing, a pro-thing they are willing to do. Do you understand what I am saying? There seems to be a lot of conflict going on, or it is home schooling versus formal schooling. In fact, I have learnt today that it is a bit more complicated and actually is not school centred but more about child centred. Do you understand what I am saying?

Ms HANKINSON: I think the idea of formal schooling is a bit misleading. There are diverse settings. Schools are very busy places. They have a range of communities and needs that they address. They provide an enormous range of experiences for learning for children. So the old concept of schools as very static places is completely wrong in terms of today's society. Teachers do an enormous job in meeting those various needs, but our major focus, as Ms Uren has said, is the provision of resources for public education to meet the needs of every child. Home schooling is not, as we have said, our major focus. To have a child removed to the home because of bullying would not be our answer at all.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Bullying has come up, but that is not the only reason people are home schooling. The concept is that the school can cater for the needs of every child. This is getting to the heart of what I am trying to find out: Basically, it has been put to us that there needs to be more flexibility in our provision for education. I do not want to call it an education system. I want to talk about our provision of education. We have a law that education is compulsory and we have provision for education. Why can we not have more flexibility in the way that is delivered without it creating world war three every time someone is interested in a different model?

Ms UREN: The Federation is not saying that we need to go and change the Education Act to remove home schooling as an option but that the public system must be able to cope and needs to be properly resourced to be able to do so.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Okay.

Ms UREN: A parent should not find themselves in the position where they feel they have no choice but to home school.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I think that is a point very well made and I certainly would accept that point.

The Hon. ADAM SEARLE: I think we all do.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is disappointing if a school is losing a kid for those sorts of reasons, I agree. In the diversity of our children, their talents and skills, and the diversity of families' beliefs and values in the community, I wonder whether we could not have more flexibility. Mark Latham wrote a book once—I do not want to be too provocative by mentioning that name—and he proposed charter schools and talked about a submission he put to Bob Carr for some parents, I believe in south-western Sydney, whose children had disabilities. He thought they had the breakthrough; Bob Carr actually announced that it was going to be funded and that there could be a community-based school around that special need in that area. I think then

the suggestion in his book was that the Teachers' Federation pulled the plug on that idea and Bob Carr backflipped. I raise that as an example of the need for flexibility whereas the Federation does not seem to be well disposed to more flexible models other than a comprehensive government school.

Ms UREN: A comprehensive government school does not necessarily mean that there is no capacity for flexibility within the school. That does not necessarily mean that there is no capacity for the school to design programs according to the needs of the children enrolled in that school. The support of comprehensive education is a sort of long-held one of the Federation and is largely about—sorry, I have to think carefully about my words because I am talking about things before my time as an individual.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I understand that. I am asking philosophical questions.

Ms HANKINSON: The model of comprehensive public education has successfully delivered high levels of literacy, high levels of social cohesion and participatory democracy to this State and nation. So the model to be properly resourced is our goal and primary function. In the areas of special education, charter schools have been deplorable in their outcomes. The model has been quite severely debunked in England and America. So we stand proudly against that model. The comprehensive high school model has proven to be quite successful in delivering those outcomes, and the Gonski model—

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: It is a great system. I am not arguing.

Ms HANKINSON: I know. The Gonski model, in the way it offers a funding model that addresses specific indices of need, if properly rolled out would address a lot of these concerns.

CHAIR: Unfortunately, time has expired. Thank you both for your evidence. No doubt, it will be very helpful. If you have taken any questions on notice, you have 21 days to get the answers back to us. Committee members may choose to send through further questions or investigations on some of the information you have provided.

Ms UREN: Will you? I have not necessarily made a note of any.

CHAIR: The secretariat has it all in hand. If you need some help, they are there. Thank you for attending. Thank you to all the people on the web and to those in the public gallery thank you for joining us today.

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 4.59 p.m.)