

# TEACH Bulletin

## Thorough Education Achieved in a Caring Home

Number 27

May 1999

### MoE Asks ERO to do Fewer Reviews this Year

Information gathered by ERO officers in the course of reviewing some 1800 home educators since December 1997 affirms that home education "is a low-risk sector in terms of educational failure and as a result this has persuaded the Government to reduce the number of reviews it purchased this financial year from an original 1200 down to 900."

This reduction in the number of reviews requested by the MoE is in line with the decision made by the then Minister of Education, Hon Dr Lockwood Smith, who stopped regular reviews of home educators altogether in July 1994, saying he could not justify the expense.

### Concerns Answered

The above comments were included in a lengthy letter from the ERO's Home Schooling Manager Tony Cross dated 28 April as he answered a number of questions from this Editor regarding concerns over the ERO's Manual of Standard Procedures for home educators. (These concerns were outlined in TEACH Bulletin No. 24 of February this year.)

1. Why is there an increasing emphasis on the education received by the child rather than focussing on that which is mentioned in the Act, namely, the teaching provided by the parent? This seems to be a move across the board within the MoE, for the *Manawatu Evening Standard* of 13 May 1999 (p. 3) says of the

just-released draft arts curriculum, "The new curriculum would focus on students' learning outcomes rather than on the specifics of what and how teachers would teach."

The ERO's response was that the emphasis has always been on the teaching, but that seeing what work the child produces and speaking with the child "is a proxy for evaluating the teaching". This is, of course, perfectly logical. But there is no legal requirement to see the child or the child's work:

review officers do have the legal right to *request* to see the work and speak with the child, but no power to *require* such in the same way as they do have the legal power to require us parents to produce documents and make statements relating to the "educational services" we provide to our children (see Section 328c of the Act). The concern is that those things to which we home educators *voluntarily acquiesce* today may well become the *legal requirements* tomorrow. Let us be wise in what we do, in the precedents we set which *will affect* the home education environment of our children and grandchildren.

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### Raising the Level of the Supervisory Allowance

In his role as Chairman of the National Council of Home Educators, NZ (PO Box 288, Hamilton), Peter George wrote to the Minister of Education, the Hon Dr Nick Smith, asking about the level of funding currently received by home educators in the form of the supervisory allowance. Dr Smith replied as follows:

*The Government meets its obligations for the education of our children by putting in place arrangements to provide education for all students of compulsory school age. Homeschoolers, by their own choice, can seek an exemption from those arrangements and the requirements of the Education Act for enrolment in a registered school. I agree with the views of the previous Minister of Education that homeschoolers assume too much if they argue that the exercise of their own choice should automatically lead to re-*

*sourcing from the state at a level equivalent to, or related to, per pupil expenditure in the state or other registered schools. They know the funding situation when they make their choice so it is part of the context in which they exercise that choice. There is no requirement on the state to provide for each child in the way every parent wants. The core government requirement is to ensure equitable access to a state school for all New Zealand children. Once a student moves out of that framework, it is a Government policy decision as to what level of support is appropriate.*

After touring the barnyard, he finally makes the point that funding levels are Government policy decisions. Such decisions are influenced & directed by lobby groups such as home schoolers. So those wanting more funding need to get organised and get busy!



Desk Copy

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2. The ERO manual directs review officers to compare the performance of home educated children "in terms of achievement and enjoyment".

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This is clearly outside the Act. The ERO's reply: "ERO would have serious doubts about the quality of the teaching if the child did not achieve and had nothing to show for the parental teaching. Elements of successful teaching which would help define 'well' include enjoyment, developing a desire to learn and developing a clear purpose for learning." Again, this is fairly reasonable, although it certainly does not fit well with some very popular home educational approaches (the John Holt and Raymond Moore schools of thought for example). The assumption behind this is that the state agencies of the ERO and MoE know best and can forcibly remove your child from your home and force him or her to attend one of their institutions if they are not "satisfied" with what they see of the child and his or her work. What happens if the ERO is not happy with the achievement, happiness level or quality of work of a child already in a state school? The child is not removed from the school but remains there; the school gets a bad report but continues to be funded. The assumption behind all this is that state schools are by definition good even when they are bad and at all times legally preferred to the home. Home education occurs at the sufferance of the state, not because parents have an unfettered right to educate their own children (see the MoE's Home School Desk File, page 2).

3. A few comments in the ERO manual seemed to indicate that the way parents spent the Supervisory Allowance was now coming under scrutiny. Here is the ERO's reply:

*ERO has an interest in all spending by Govern-*

*ment on education and this includes, at a general level, the spending of the Homeschool Supervision Allowance. The Education Review Office does not suggest that there are strings attached to the allowance. As you will have noted from our Standard Procedures, and individuals will have seen from reports, no judgement is being made on the appropriateness or inappropriateness of such spending in any individual case. Review Officers accept whatever answer is given. They do not ask specifically what resources it has been spent on. In fact, the most common response by homeschooling parents is that the allowance is spent on resources. There is always clear evidence of this in the variety and number of learning resources available to children.*

The editor knows he will come in for criticism as an irresponsible scare-monger, but it is part of his perceived job to ask dumb questions such as the following: If the Review Officers "accept whatever answer is given", then why do they bother to ask at all?

4. Another concern from the ERO manual is that the ERO appears to view the Information Statement provided at the time of applying for an exemption as a *de facto* school charter. The ERO's reply to this was encouraging. First, they referred to the Information Statement as a "Statement of Intent". This does seem to be a much more useful term. The ERO response is quoted in full:

*Clearly the Statement of Intent is not a Charter. It is however an obligation that parents undertake at the time they are granted their exemption. It is their statement of intention, and as such, provides the only information against which a programme can be judged. Some basis is needed for judging the programme. The contractual obligations referred to are in fact the obligations that a parent takes on by receiving an exemption, that is to ensure that*

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## TEACH Bulletin

is a monthly publication of the Home Education Foundation, and is concerned with those things which may impact on home educators. Articles will deal with political developments, statist and professional trends, correspondence with educationalists, and other items of general interest to home educators. Information herein is not to be construed as legal advice.

TEACH Bulletin is available for a subscription of \$16 per year for 11 issues (none in December) or two years for \$30.

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Hear, my son, your father's instruction,  
and reject not your mother's teaching.  
— Proverbs 1:8

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*teaching as regular and well as in a registered school is provided. The Statement of Intent will most certainly change over time. Parents learn from their experience and change the way in which they teach and the way in which they manage their programme. I agree that there appears to be no statutory requirement to inform the Ministry of Education of any changes. However our view is that if the changes were significant, for example from a programme based on ACE to a totally unstructured programme, then there is an obligation to inform the Ministry of Education of the change if for no other reason than to prevent any misunderstanding at the time the exemption is reviewed. ERO has not insisted on that, nor have review officers suggested revocation where there was significant change. We have suggested that parents should let the Ministry know, not you will note, suggesting that they reapply for the exemption.*

5. Some of the prompt questions listed in the ERO manual seemed

inappropriate: "Who does your child mostly talk to? Does your child go for long parts of the day without talking to anyone including you? What sort of questions does your child usually ask you?" The ERO response was that these are only sample-type questions the reviewer may or may not use in order to stimulate conversation about home education with the parent. This is acceptable for most of the prompt questions but very doubtful in regard to the questions quoted above: these are the kind of questions one would use on a "fishing" expedition to hook onto some kind of dysfunction within a family. It leaves one with the uncomfortable feeling that there might be such people within the ERO, just looking for the opportunity to catch an unwary home educator by an unso-phisticated answer to such questions.

6. The ERO manual used the term "approved curriculum" in ways that could be construed to mean two or three different things. The ERO responded by saying:

*Approved curriculum refers to the programme submitted in the Statement of Intent to the Ministry of Education and "approved" as meeting the requirements of the Education Act for the granting of an exemption. The prompt question could more accurately read, "Does the curriculum delivered reflect the original approved curriculum?", however review officers are clear about what it means as it is currently expressed and do not look for any other curriculum.*

7. There is at the end of each review a set of seven questions under the heading "Statistics Information Sheet". The answers to these questions are not part of the review, but according to the ERO manual have the purpose of "provid(ing) information which can be analysed by the (ERO) to inform policy development and decision making by the Government, and for reporting on aspects of homeschooling nationally."

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The question of concern posed to the ERO referred to this set of seven questions as a Government social policy research project, possibly conducted without the family's informed consent or the option not to participate (both standard ethical "musts" for social policy research projects involving human subjects). Although the ERO response to this was to deny it was a research project, they confirmed that the information was collected "firstly to consider any changes that should be made to our own processes and secondly to provide useful information for the policy making process both as it affects schools and homeschooling."

This plus the questions themselves tend to convince this editor that it most certainly is a piece of social policy research, one that Government research teams would find virtually impossible to conduct if it were not for the fact that it is piggy-backing on a compulsory review of virtually every home educator in the country. (In fact, an MoE research effort by Jacqui Kerslake in early 1996 resulted in highly skewed results: only a 44% response rate and 29% of those were using Correspondence School when only 9% of home educators nationally use the CS.)

The questions ask for the number of children in the family, whether they are home educated or not; the reasons why they are home educated, an area into which not even the exemption application dares to pry; the type and name of the programme, revealing one's religious and/or philosophical orientation; and another question about how the supervisory allowance is used.

This editor personally favours such research projects. But they must be up-front and not compulsory or bypassing standard ethical procedures such as those already named and not flirting at the edges of others in that the information collected is being used for purposes other than those the per-

son from whom it is collected believes it is being used. If people do not want their personal data (even though totally anonymous) used to inform the present Government's policy, how can the ERO ethically compulsorily collect it from them for just that purpose?

The ERO is to be commended for the extensive efforts they have made to inform their officers of what home education is all about, for being so obviously concerned to develop a thoroughly professional approach to their task, for putting together such a comprehensive procedures manual, and for the generally clear and open way in which the reviews are initiated, conducted and reported. With greater input from larger numbers of home educators at the next revision of their procedures manual, they will surely come a lot closer to getting it right.



## The Sad State of Education

In order to think clearly about education, understand that education and attendance at institutions are two different subjects. A person can educate himself without attending an institution; and a person can graduate from an educational institution without having received an education. The biggest consumer fraud today is university education. Most of the kids' parents aren't getting what they are paying through the nose for. Outside the fields of engineering and the hard sciences, where fraud is difficult, most universities are peddling 1960s heifer dust in lieu of an education. The answer is to abandon public education. Pull your children out, and let it collapse. It's bad to waste a mind; it's even worse to ruin one.

(Charley Reese, *Orlando Sentinel*, 633 N. Orange Ave., Orlando, FL 32801 OSOREESE@aol.com)

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