

TEACH Bulletin

Thorough Education Achieved in a Caring Home

Number 51

July 2001

Compulsory Pre-School Plans

The government is considering forcing four-year-olds to attend pre-school. According to Education Minister Trevor Mallard, although the move would be aimed at lifting pre-school education among Maori and Pacific Islanders, *all* four-year-olds may be required to attend 12 hours each week at an early childhood centre.

It's the old "Swat the fly with a sledge hammer" approach often favoured by bureaucrats and vested interest groups. The "one size fits all" philosophy behind this is well known by home educators to be ineffective, and even professional educators are starting to openly question its wisdom. Yet it is the easiest system for administrators to implement and administer: a blanket compulsion for all whether they need it or not. All the pre-school institutions will be smiling for at least two reasons: their services will be in demand (well, legally required anyway) as long as such a law is on the books, and the Minister has hinted that funding will be forthcoming to ensure their fees are met and they can make the necessary adjustments to increased attendance. And such a move certainly creates job opportunities for pre-school teachers, pre-school teacher training, builders, cleaners, maintenance staff, etc.

But the stated reason for such compulsion is to "close the gaps".....it is thought that those who miss out on pre-school institutionalisation are at a disadvantage when they start primary school.

Such a policy of compulsion could take years to introduce, particularly as kindergartens in Auckland and elsewhere have huge waiting lists. However, in a first-ever role for the government in planning early childhood services, Trevor Mallard is encouraging new schools to attach early childhood centres to themselves to ease the transition between pre-school and primary school. New centres are also being built in relocatable classrooms so that kindies and playcentres can be shifted to areas of need when populations change.

Much of the language used to justify such a move to compulsorily require 4-year-olds to attend pre-school is about filling the gaps, citing much anecdotal evidence as well as research that those who attend pre-school institutions do better in school later on. Reporter Sarah Catherall wrote in the *Sunday Star Times* of 29 July that "[Minister of Education Trevor] Mallard said studies had found quality early childhood education improved performance through primary school and later in life, and was even more important than parental education and income." Such arguments do not wash with home educators, many of whom would see such data as simply saying the earlier you get little ones

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Computers Can Be Mere Costly Craze

In regards to computers in schools, have you ever heard it said, "Children need this technology in order to compete in the global marketplace of the future.?" Problem is, the research has been a lot more cautious, if not just plain critical, of such ideas.

Schools have been known to eliminate music programs to hire a technology co-ordinator, or to turn their art room into a computer laboratory. In the United States, a record \$6.5 billion was spent on educational technology for the 1998-99 school year, while funding for music, arts and other speciality areas continued to shrink. And yet, nearly every measure of children's educational performance refused to rise. The uncritical rush to place expensive

computer technologies into schools has led to one of the most expensive -- yet least helpful -- revolutions in the history of American schooling.

Leading the charge in the questioning of the educational effectiveness of computers is the book, *The Child and the Machine: How Computers Put Our Children's Education at Risk*, published last year by Robins Lane Press of Beltsville, MD (256 pages, ISBN: 0-87659-210-8). Author Alison Armstrong visited schools across the United States and Canada, "selecting those that were recognized as exemplary in their use of computer technology." She was aided in her research by Charles Casement, who concentrated on the published research in U.S.,

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 institutionalised to where they consider such socialisation the norm, the less they will buck the system later. And of course such assertions also imply that parents either aren't capable of or can't be bothered to instruct their children in some basics such as paying attention, raising their hands, knowing the colours, waiting in line, taking turns, etc. While it is true home educating parents don't often major on training their children to wait in line or raise their hands -- for obvious reasons -- they rightly resent the negative implications.

In addition, some educators who are encouraging this move to compulsory pre-school do so by saying it gives the children a jump start academically. Unfortunately for this argument, Educational Institute executive member Jenny Varney says early childhood teachers do not see their role as preparing children for school. She says pre-school is to give children life skills, help them interact with others and co-operate. Home educators often wonder why one needs pre-school to do that, for studies show a child will have

hundreds more one-to-one interactions *per day* with a parent at home than it is possible for them to have in a pre-school institutional environment. And Helen May, professor of early childhood education at Victoria University, said studies showed that if the early childhood education centre was not of sufficient quality, the child was better off not being there.

Since the law currently only compels 6-year-olds and above to attend school, to force 4-year-olds into pre-school institutions is quite a jump. Then one wonders about 5 year olds....will they also be compelled to attend, or can they maintain their freedom for that year?

Some home educators might be thinking that it could be quite a good deal -- financially -- if the compulsory attendance age were dropped to 4, for then we could apply for exemptions two years earlier and receive the MoE's homeschooling allowance for an extra two years! Please do not go down that track. Such a radical move as this one which Trevor Mallard has proposed raises many

difficult compliance and implementation issues. The extra funding for the pre-schools will be a major expense, and to tack a homeschooling allowance onto that funding could easily and logically attract the same accountability procedures as this pre-school funding will have.

(Parts of article excerpted from "Government Mulls Compulsory Preschool", *Sunday Star Times*, 29 July 2001, by Sarah Catherall, <http://www.stuff.co.nz/inl/>

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 European and international journals.

They asked the big question: "Do computers improve the quality of instruction in schools?" "So far," they conclude, "the most that can be said about computer-based instruction is that vast sums have been lavished on technology whose educational potential has yet to be proven." They repeatedly advocate real-life teachers and real-life experiences for elementary school children.

"If teachers do not receive adequate and ongoing training, money spent on computer technology will largely be wasted.Apple Computer has discovered that it takes an average of **five to six years** for teachers to change their method of teaching so that they are using the computers in a way that benefits students." (Emphasis added.)

"[There is also] the notion that once students are given computers, they will somehow become less dependent upon the classroom teacher for learning. In fact, introducing a computer into the classroom, particularly for schools that are connected to the Internet, will make the role of the teacher, and thus adequate teacher training as well, more essential than ever."

The New Zealand education system is also awash with schemes to push computer literacy onto students. But as Armstrong and Casement point out, computer literacy, whatever the term may mean, is of little use to students who lack basic academic and thinking skills. In reviewing the book, Vanessa Bush said in the *Booklist* issue of 15 May 2000, "Armstrong and Casement see computers as being in danger of becoming, like TV, a threat to educational development. They note that most studies on how computers affect learning are inconclusive. The amount of benefit that students derive from computers depends on their state of developmental readiness and the adequacy of their teachers'

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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. Opinions expressed in TEACH Bulletin are those of the writer and should not be assumed to reflect those of the Home Education Foundation Trustees or Board of Reference Members.

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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(Continued from page 2: Craze) training."

"There is no overwhelming evidence to support the notion computers have improved our schools or our children's education in the U.S., Canada, or elsewhere," Armstrong says. "We have to put this in context: Radio was going to revolutionize education, but it didn't; television was going to revolutionize education, but it didn't."

Computers – and especially television – can interfere with the workings of a child's imagination. "When a child is listening to a story, that child is supplying the images, that child is working very hard to give meat to the bones of the story," she says. "When you're reading *The Hobbit*, you have to imagine what Bilbo Baggins looks like."

Children should not only be protected from overexposure to computers and television but also challenged with the best literature has to offer. "My kids aren't interested in Walt Disney's Cinderella," says Armstrong. "They've read Cinderella in the original; they've read the Chinese version of Cinderella, the story of Yeh-Shen. "They wouldn't think of reading a knockoff of those stories. They would be bored."

The Harry Potter hoopla has amused Armstrong, who said that

her 9-year-old daughter has devoured every book. "But she told me the other day, 'Mom, they're good, but they're not that good.' I think if you give a child, any child, a diet of the best literature, they're going to grow up with an understanding of what great literature is, and they're not going to be fooled by imposters."

Connie Pottle is the youth services coordinator at the Columbus (Ohio) Metropolitan Library's Main Library which has 14 computers dedicated to children 2 to 5. She is also a professional storyteller. "I can captivate a roomful of kids in a way no computer ever will. So computers are not the answer. They're just a way of extending the learning opportunities for children. They're excellent tools. But they're just tools," Pottle said. "A one-on-one experience with an adult is by far the most important thing for a child. Reading aloud to a child in his or her pre-school years is crucial. Nothing replaces a father's lap for a child who can interact with Dad while he's reading a story."

(Parts excerpted from "Computer Can't Replace Parent Reading to Child" by Bill Eichenberger in *The Columbus Dispatch* of 13 August 2000.)

Schools Are ~~Expensive Targets~~

Education Ministry statistics show that arson attacks caused more than \$3 million damage to New Zealand schools in the financial year to June 2000. There were 83 school fires, 63 of which were deliberately lit, an increase of 24 cases and \$1 million on the previous year.

As at April in this financial year, ministry statistics show that more than \$2.5 million of damage has already been inflicted on schools, but the number of arson cases is down to 31.

So arsonists this year are doing almost the same amount of damage with half the number of fires. In the last three years we

see that arson against schools cost the taxpayer around \$7.5 million. The cost of simple vandalism against school properties is on top of this. It seems state schooling has all kinds of hidden costs. How much of that is trauma induced stress, insecurity and fear in the children? I for one am happy mine don't attend.

A Real Winner

Russell Street School in ~~Palmerston North~~ was announced best medium sized primary/intermediate school at the school-of-the-year awards in Wellington on 27 June, collecting \$10,000 in prize money. The school was selected from more than 100 entries in its category. Principal Tim White said the teachers "are hard working, dedicated and motivated and have become learners to become good teachers." Pupil Hayley Marshall, 11, said she liked the way teachers understood how pupils felt about things and took time to explain things in person instead of talking to groups. She also said there were interesting subjects and lots of books in the library.

Note that the keys to success mentioned attract a large reward in a school setting, but are generally considered characteristics typical of the average home education environment. Schools work hard to attain to what homes and families can do quite naturally all by themselves.

Child Brain Development

1. Keep the television turned off as much as possible. One author recommends avoiding television as much as possible for the first 12 years of your child's life and then encourage your child to always read the book first before seeing the movie. It helps to cover the TV with a cloth or store it away in a closed cabinet or closet. Out of sight really helps the child keep the TV out of mind (Large, 1997). Remember that what we do serves as a role model for our children. We can't really ask our

children to stop watching TV if we keep doing it — that will eventually lead to power struggles.

When the television is on, try to neutralize its damage. Select the programs carefully and watch TV with your child so you can talk about what you see. Keep a light on when the TV is going since that will minimize the effects of the reduced field of vision and provide a different light source for the eyes. Try to sit at least 4 feet from the television and 18 inches from the computer screen. Plan to go outside (to the park, woods, or beach) after viewing television.

2. Read a lot of books to your children (especially ones without lots of pictures) and tell your children lots of stories. Children love to hear stories about our lives when we were little or you can make them up. Bedtime and riding in the car provide good opportunities for telling stories. Telling our children stories helps to stimulate their internal picture making capabilities.

3. Nature! Nature! Nature! Nature is the greatest teacher of patience, delayed gratification, reverence, awe and observation. The colors are spectacular and all the senses are stimulated. Many children today think being out in nature is boring because they are so used to the fast-paced, action-packed images from TV (Poplawski, 1998). We only truly learn when all our senses are involved, and when the information is presented to us in such a way that our higher brain can absorb it. Nature is reality while television is a pseudo-reality.

4. Pay close attention to your senses and those of your child. Our environment is noisy and over-stimulating to the sense organs. What a child sees, hears, smells, tastes and touches is extremely important to his or her development. We need to surround our children with what is beautiful, what is good and what is true. How a child experiences the world has a tremendous influence on how the child

perceives the world as a teenager and adult.

5. Have children use their hands, feet and whole body performing purposeful activities. All the outdoor activities of running, jumping, climbing, and playing jump-rope help develop our children's gross motor skills and myelinate pathways in the higher brain. Performing household chores, cooking, baking bread, knitting, woodworking, origami, string games, finger games, circle games, painting, drawing and coloring help develop fine motor skills and also myelinate pathways in the higher brain.

The future of our children and our society is in the protection and development of our children's minds, hearts and limbs.

By Susan R. Johnson, M.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Pediatrics, Division of Behavioral and Developmental Pediatrics, UCSF /Stanford Health Care and Graduate of San Francisco Waldorf Teacher Training Program of Rudolf Steiner College.

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- Poplawski, Thomas. "Losing Our Senses". *Renewal: A Journal for Waldorf Education*, Vol. 7, No. 2, Fall 1998.

Home Education Foundation South Island Speaking Tour

For 19 days (18 nights) from 19 June through 8 July, HE Foundation trustees Craig & Barbara Smith (and four children) had the privilege of speaking to 10 groups of home educators all over the South Island (about 196 adults at two all-day conferences, one 1/2 day conference and seven evening meetings), sleeping in 12 different beds, getting extra extended time with 15 HE families and covering a total of

3,677 km in the process. We often experienced crisp, white mornings with deep blue skies serrated on the lower edge by jagged snow-capped mountains. North Islanders, if you haven't done so as yet, you simply must visit the scenic south...it rivals the best from anywhere else!

Last minute preparations were such that Barbara never went to bed the night before we left, and I only got two hours of shut-eye. We folded and stuffed the latest *TEACH Bulletin* into envelopes as we crossed Cook Strait and posted them in Havelock. About 30 HEs met in Stoke near Nelson from 3:30 pm until late, some saying the discussions revolutionised their thinking! The meeting next evening in Hokitika counted about 25 adults keen to hear more on home educating into secondary and beyond.

The all-Saturday conference in Invercargill was unique with its teen panel and high interest in secondary and tertiary issues from the 25 or so there. It was great to be putting faces to names I'd known of for years. Dunedin hosted an all day conference -- on a Monday, no less -- which was a roaring success due to the enthusiastic crowd of about 35 adults and the tremendous organisation skills of the locals. The numbers of HEs in this city has increased rapidly in the last couple of years, and so has the attendant encouragement among them all.

In Oamaru we met with eight adult and five teenaged HEs, who were all really eager to hear more and more and who themselves encouraged us a lot with their vision. Two nights later a really committed group of seven adults gathered at Montalto way inland from Ashburton. Like all these one-evening meetings, we try to squash in all we'd say in a full day conference.....and people are keen to stay late to hear as much as possible. Eleven adults and 6 teenagers gathered in Christchurch one evening to talk about home educating through secondary and into tertiary. The meeting in Timaru attracted 19

people, 15 family groups, who really didn't feel like going home afterwards! The two solid hours of talking simply weren't enough.

The next two and a half days were full of excitement as we stayed with relations on their 15,000 acre high country sheep station in the McKenzie country. Got to feed out to the deer and sheep, to wake up to a frost of 12 degrees below zero C., to pick up deer antler buttons in the paddock, to shoot rabbits and hares and possums by spotlight, to slither over the icy, snow-covered Hakataramea pass to a deer auction near Kurow, to not make it back over the pass but slide backwards out of control into the bank, to be towed out by passing four-wheelers who had also been to the deer sale, to see the sun set and rise on Mt Cook from the farm, and to play ice hockey at Lake Tekapo.

The Amberley/Waipara area of North Canterbury is known as the home school centre of New Zealand, as there are so many in the area. The meeting in Amberley numbered about 19, most of whom had had many years of experience. And finally in Blenheim we met with 17 adults plus children who hung around for ages wanting to talk more about HE issues. These meetings never were long enough!

We can't begin to properly thank all the people who organised the meetings and catered for children and looked after refreshments and pot-Providence meals and who put us up and fed us and who donated toward the travel expenses. Each group we met was unique, but always in evidence was the pioneer spirit and self-reliant attitudes that so characterise HEs. There were some areas of uncertainty, especially around dealing with the ERO Review and moving through secondary to the work force, tertiary and beyond, but people soon seemed to see that there were many more options than School Cert, Bursary or this new NCEA. Clearly, whenever HEs gather together, they have so much to share and can encourage and strengthen one another in so many ways. Feedback was very

positive that our talks on the difference between schooling and education, HE as life education, ERO reviews and MoE exemptions, the dads' role, a vision for the future and ways to counter stress are helping HEs by clarifying and confirming what is already known or suspected. For many these talks also opened up new areas of freedom they hadn't previously considered.

It became clearer than ever as we discussed so many HE issues with so many people that the HE environment in New Zealand is one of the best in the world and worth preserving just as it is.

The Seduction of Home Education

Home Education in NZ is the envy of many other parts of the world. The authors of the 1988 Picot Report *Administering for Excellence: Effective Administration in Education* said the following: "Each successive Education Act since 1877 has included the right of citizens to educate their own children, provided that a standard of education similar to that available in a state school is maintained. As part of our commitment to increased choice in the system, we wish that right to be continued and suggest that the procedures under which it is exercised be kept as straightforward as possible."

Although the current MoE would not use the term "right" in this way, they are very supportive of HE in general and do endeavour to make the Exemption process as straightforward as possible. The Exemption Certificate issued to a six year old is valid until the child turns 16, even though the curriculum vision outlined in the original Exemption application will undoubtedly have changed dramatically over the intervening 10 years. Yet HEs are not required to re-negotiate their Exemptions. The MoE's own definitions of the key words of "regular" and "well" in the Education Act covering HE make it clear that HEs need only to understand fully and be able to articulate clearly *their own*

curriculum vision; that is, not the MoE's Curriculum Guidelines, not the local school's vision, nor that of the nosey retired-teacher neighbour down the road....but the HE's *own personal* curriculum vision.

It is likewise this vision, not any other, which the ERO is obliged to review, even though it may be quite different from that which is described in the original Exemption application and may be deemed unusual and unorthodox by the review officer: it is the HE's curriculum vision the ERO is to review, and the criteria are that the teaching (not the effectiveness of the teaching nor the learning) be "at least as regular and well as in a registered school." The ERO cannot possibly review all HEs at any kind of regular intervals, for our numbers are growing too rapidly. At present they review only about 12% of current HEs in any one year. HEs need only sign a statutory declaration every six months that they are still home educating and the MoE pays out a Supervisory Allowance with absolutely no strings attached!

Our American HE counterparts find this particularly unbelievable, for in the USA it is an unquestioned political fact that wherever government money goes, government controls *inevitably* follow. Many state and national HE organisations in the USA warn HEs not to touch government money or state-run HE programmes under any circumstances. The Home School Legal Defense Association near Washington D.C. refuses to accept for membership any HE who accepts any state HE handouts. They have strong historical precedent for these warnings, and current practices by American public school districts bear this out.

Defenders of state schooling in the USA are fighting against the inroads HEs are making on their school roles with all the legal, legislative, and economic weapons at their disposal. The most insidious of these tactics

establish government homeschooling programs which set seductive lures before families by providing "free" resources, teachers, extracurricular activities, facilities, and even cash reimbursement.

Early programs in California offered homeschoolers a straightforward \$1,000 bribe to participate. To collect the money, homeschoolers merely had to submit receipts to the district for any educational activities or materials. It was an economic win-win situation, as the district retained the remaining \$3,000 in per-pupil funding from the state. Programs changed over time as the state gradually imposed more restrictions on homeschoolers. At first the restrictions took the form of decreasing the amount available for reimbursement and sharply limiting reimbursable items. At the same time, more curriculum resources and teachers were made available. Now, instead of having the freedom to spend money from the state on the educational materials and experiences of their own choosing, families are only reimbursed for the same consumable materials (pencils, crayons) already offered by the district.

However, despite these restrictions, the programs still provide significant economic incentives for both homeschoolers and school districts. For homeschooling families, they get access to a professional teacher, all the district resources, and extracurricular activities like sports and band -- all of it "free". With incentives like these, it's not surprising that many homeschoolers have rushed back to the same government system they once fled and, in many cases, are demanding their "rights" to these activities. This phenomenon is common enough that it's attracted national media attention.¹

The damage done to the independent homeschooling movement extends beyond offering financial and other

resources to families to seduce them into government programs. The spirit of volunteerism that suffuses homeschooling support groups and makes possible low-cost cooperative learning opportunities also is undermined by government competition. Parents who offer their time and talents voluntarily through support groups have been actively recruited by government homeschooling programs with employment opportunities at \$20 an hour.

It's a simple economic calculation for most parents to make and just one more step in the seduction of homeschoolers. The end result is a siphoning off of the creative leadership of the private homeschooling sector. Inevitably there are some who follow their leaders back into the system. When enough families have voluntarily returned to the government system, it will be a relatively straightforward matter to recapture the rest by imposing mandatory homeschooling oversight regulations.

May we HEs in New Zealand be discerning enough to value and maintain our current freedoms to home educate regardless of whatever financial incentives there may be should such a trade-off ever be offered here.

Reference:

1. See Dana Hawkins, "Homeschool Battles: Clashes Grow as Some in the Movement Seek Access to Public Schools", *U.S. News and World Report*, February 12, 1996.

(Parts excerpted from "The Seduction of Homeschooling Families" by Chris Cardiff in *The Freeman* (Foundation for Economic Education), March 1998 -- Vol. 48, No. 3.