

Home Education Foundation

PO Box 9064, Palmerston North 4441, New Zealand
Ph. +64 6 357-4399 Fax: +64 6 357-4389 mail@hef.org.nz www.hef.org.nz
Charities Commission Registration Nbr.: CC24585 G.S.T. Nbr.: 55-380-562

2 August 2014

The Director
Select Committee on Home Schooling
Parliament House
Macquarie St
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sirs,

Submission to the Select Committee Inquiry into Homeschooling Home Education Foundation of New Zealand

Like many other home educators around the world, the Home Education Foundation of New Zealand was surprised and disturbed by reports of the New South Wales Board of Studies' 2013 Home Schooling Information Pack, which promised to regulate home education more severely in New South Wales than in any other Australian jurisdiction.

The Home Education Foundation welcomes this inquiry into home education and hopes that the Committee will take this opportunity to hear the concerns of New South Wales and other home educators. Home educators often feel that they are fighting an uphill battle to help legislators and bureaucrats understand, much less support, their beliefs and practices. We would respectfully ask you to keep a sympathetic and open mind as you receive submissions from parents and families for whom home education is not simply a 9 to 3 learning venue, but a treasured way of life.

We have read the Committee's Terms of Reference for the inquiry and would like to take this opportunity to present you with our advice, which is based on over 30 years' experience home educating and working with home educators in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and around the world.

(a) The background of home schooling including comparison of practices with other jurisdictions in Australia and New Zealand

Under current regulations in New Zealand, parents may home educate a child on approval of an exemption application by the Ministry of Education. The relevant legislation provides that approval may be granted if the Minister is satisfied that the child will be taught "at least as regularly and well" as he or she would be in a registered school. Visits to home educators' homes are not compulsory at any point, nor is approval of home educators' syllabuses, although the exemption process includes an outline of the intended teaching method. Exemption, once granted, does not need to be renewed. Around 600 annual reviews conducted at a venue of the parents' choice by the Education Review Office per year were at one time carried out, but this ceased in July 2009 because, according to the Ministry of Education, "This programme is considered to be low risk to the education priorities of the Government." Fewer than 35 reviews are now done annually.

New Zealand home educators, who presumably display a similar variety of beliefs, motivations, socioeconomic status, and educational background to those of New South Wales, were greatly encouraged by this recognition from the Ministry of Education that they were doing their job well.

For reasons addressed later in this submission, the Home Education Foundation otherwise finds the current situation in New Zealand **unsatisfactorily highly-regulated** from a parent's point of view. The current New South Wales home education regulations are more onerous than the New Zealand structure, but we would discourage the Committee from taking the New Zealand structure as an example.

(b)(i) Outcomes of home schooling including in relation to transition to further study and work

We are not in a position to comment on these things specifically in relation to New South Wales homeschoolers. However it is thoroughly well-documented by now that on average, home educated students do well in transitioning to further study and work.

For example, in a 2007 article titled "Homeschooled Students Excel in College", Christopher Klicka, reporting for the Home School Legal Defence Association, said, "Research has shown that homeschoolers on average do better than the national average on standardized achievement tests for the elementary and secondary grade levels. Statistics demonstrate that homeschoolers tend to score above the national average on both their SAT and ACT scores." The *Homeschool Progress Report 2009: Academic Achievement and Demographics* report compiled by Dr Brian Ray of the National Home Education Research Institute surveyed over 50,000 home educated students in the US and found that home educated students score, on average, 37 percentile points above public school students on standardized achievement tests.

In a 2003 study titled *Homeschooling Grows Up*, the same researcher, Dr Ray, surveyed over 7300 home educated adults and found that:

- Over 74% of home-educated adults ages 18-24 have taken college-level courses, compared to 46% of the general United States population.

- Homeschool graduates are active and involved in their communities. Seventy-one percent participate in an ongoing community service activity (e.g., coaching a sports team, volunteering at a school, or working with a church or neighborhood association), compared to 37% of U.S. adults of similar ages. Eighty-eight percent of the homeschool graduates surveyed were members of an organization (e.g., such as a community group, church or synagogue, union, homeschool group, or professional organization), compared to 50% of U.S. adults.

- Only 4.2% of the homeschool graduates surveyed consider politics and government too complicated to understand, compared to 35% of U.S. adults.

- Taking all things into consideration, 59% of the subjects reported that they were "very happy" with life, with another 39% declaring that they were "pretty happy". Life is exciting for most (73%). When compared to the general population of the United States, homeschool graduates are more content.

- 95% of the homeschool graduates surveyed were glad that they were homeschooled. In the opinion of the homeschool graduates, homeschooling had not hindered them in their careers or education. Eighty-two percent would homeschool their own children.

In the Australian context, Glenda Jackson's *Summary of Australian Research on Home Education* (2011) arrives at a number of conclusions based on the available research: Home-educated students in Australia do as well academically or better than their schooled peers; are able to acquire social skills and recover from bad social experiences at school; come from a variety of backgrounds and income levels, none of which has an impact on the quality of their education; and are generally happy about being educated at home. In Victoria, which until 2006 had a very relaxed level of government regulation, Jeff Richardson of Monash University stated that home-educated students perform "extremely well, above average" in universities, no matter what form their education might have taken: "On any measure you like, socially or academically, they will do better."

(b)(iii) Demographics and motivation of parents to home school their children

In our experience, parents across the world choose to home educate for many different reasons. Some choose to home educate during a period of travel. Some choose to home educate because of bullying or other bad influences in schools or a perceived inability of schools to provide personal, one-on-one care to a child with special needs. Some are dissatisfied with standard one-size-fits-all curricula and prefer their children to learn at the pace that comes most naturally, whether faster or slower than the standard. Some home educate for religious reasons, believing that they are called as parents to deliver an education that reinforces their beliefs. Others simply prefer to spend as much time with their child as possible during their precious youth.

For most parents, the reason may be a combination of some or all—or none--of the above. It should be emphasised that the decision to home educate is complex and intensely individual to the family in question. It is by nature a decision made in response to a family's unique circumstances. The one unifying factor is that home education is a decision made because a one-size-fits-all approach is incapable of providing adequately for the children's needs. Home education is the nonstandard educational option. Regulating and standardising it strips it of the very benefits that make it the preferred option of thousands of Australian families, and effectively renders those families incapable of choosing the best educational and lifestyle path for their children.

(c)(i) Current registration processes and ways of reducing the number of unregistered home schoolers

In our experience, home educators fail to register with governmental authorities if they perceive the government's regulations to be inappropriate. The Committee may be aware of the situation in Queensland until recently. The Queensland home education regulations were so stringent that the majority (estimated as high as 80%) of Queensland home educators were unregistered. In response, the Queensland government relaxed its regulations to encourage home educators to register.

(c)(vi) Appropriateness of the current regulatory regime and ways in which it could be improved

It should be noted that for some home educators, any registration process will be viewed as inappropriate. We are of this perspective and would respectfully invite you to keep an open mind on this possibility.

Many home educators consider that the family, not the civil government, is personally and primarily responsible for the education of their children. We assert that this is a basic parental duty given by divine decree in Scriptures such as Ephesians 6:4. We would further draw the Committee's attention to a number of treaties at international law that assert a parent's right to choose what kind of education his or her child shall receive, as for example the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) Article 26 (3) - "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) Article 10 (1) and 13 (3)3 - "The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to choose for their children schools, other than those established by the public authorities, which conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the State and to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions."

We would argue that parents have this right to determine their child's education, including content and mode of delivery, because parents have the primary responsibility for their child's education. It may be appropriate, in cases where the authority of the family breaks down or is abused, for the civil government to step in and intervene. However, it is the Home Education Foundation's view that requiring home educators to register, be approved, and be required to follow a state syllabus goes far beyond what is appropriate and injures the rights of the family as an institution.

Just as it would be inappropriate for the legislative or administrative branches of government to take on the duties and responsibilities of the judiciary, so it is inappropriate for the civil government to trespass upon the justly exercised authority of the family, the church, or any other basic institution of society. We believe that it is basic to the authority and dignity of the family as a foundational institution of society, to choose in what manner, and by whom, their children shall be raised and educated. It is unnecessary and inappropriate for the civil government to oversee, register, and approve this process in the absence of prior evidence that the family is delinquent.

Until 2006, the Victorian regulatory framework simply required home educating parents to prove, if challenged, that their children were receiving "regular and efficient instruction". Such an approach recognised the state's role in holding parents responsible for the instruction of their children, without removing that responsibility from parents altogether. We highly commend this regulatory approach to the Committee.

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

In our experience, most home educators glean valuable support from local home education support groups, from other home educating families, and from veteran home educators who can give the benefit of their experience.

Beginning home educators may find it difficult at first to connect with these local home educators, but may be reluctant to contact government bodies for assistance. Home educators do not want to give the impression that they are struggling, to a body which may solve the problem by recommending that the children are sent to school, rather than by connecting them with other home educators who can assist them to excel. Home educators may view the government as looking for an excuse to revoke their registration to home educate, especially if it implements an onerous regulatory system.

(e) Representation of home schoolers within Board of Studies, Teaching and Educational Standards (BoSTES)

We warmly commend this suggestion. As with any industry, state, or commonwealth, no governing body should fail to include representatives of those being governed.

In closing, we would urge the Committee to remember that home educators are simply ordinary Australian parents who love, sacrifice for, and care for their children. Home education is not an easy choice to make. It usually requires a family to get by on one income and to face misunderstandings from the general community. A government can only make this lifestyle more difficult, more intimidating, and more stressful by viewing these families with suspicion.

Also, since it may be relevant, the Home Education Foundation would like to acknowledge to the work of an Australian home education graduate in writing this submission.

and hope that home educators in New South Wales can look forward to a regulatory structure which is friendlier to their lifestyle.

Yours sincerely,

The Home Education Foundation of New Zealand
Per:

Barbara Smith
National Director

Enclosures:

1. Christopher J Klicka, "Homeschooled Students Excel in College", 2007 article, <http://www.hslda.org/docs/nche/000000/CollegeExcel07.pdf>
2. Dr Brian Ray, "Homeschooling Grows Up," summary of 2003 research, <http://www.hslda.org/research/ray2003/HomeschoolingGrowsUp.pdf>