

TEACH Bulletin

Thorough Education Achieved in a Caring Home

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Desk Copy

Why Do They Make Mischief?

A person purporting to speak for, nay, "to champion" home schoolers Auckland-wide was quoted in the *North Shore Times Advertiser* of 11 November 1999 as saying he and the organisation of which he is a part "would welcome more ERO reviews beyond the initial one done at six months." With whom did he consult to come up with this as a way to "champion" our cause? Hands up those who were canvassed? When do you ever hear teachers or nurses or carpenters saying publicly that their own people need more outside supervision? While most reviews are indeed of a positive nature, they are universally regarded as highly stressful. Most people also find them to be an unneeded interruption and a poor use of time.

Another person from this same organisation apparently told a reporter from *North & South* that "There are over 130 support groups out there, with a myriad of views and services, some very extreme and inferior, none monitored by the state. This seriously undermines the possibility of good home schooling opportunities." This statement just went nationwide in *N&S's* December issue, page 124. One must again ask where such an opinion originated and how it serves "to champion" home schoolers. The statement is hopelessly ambiguous, for the reader is not sure what it is that undermines the very possibility of good home schooling opportunities. However, anything that would have such a negative effect on home education should become a target for us all.

So then, what is it that "undermines"? Is it the number of support groups? While the number of support groups is growing, so is their sophistication; this cannot be the perceived problem...unless support groups by definition (this speaker's definition alone, it would have to be) undermine home schooling opportunities. Is it that these support groups are said to offer so many points of view and services? No,

for this variety is one of the essential features of home education, that one size does *not* fit all. Is it that some support groups may be offering views and services which this person labelled "very extreme and inferior"? It seems impossible to determine if this is what the speaker had in mind without knowing what proportion of those support groups would be encompassed by her indefinite pronoun "some" and how odious she reckons their extremism and inferiority causes them to be to home educators as a whole. This is a possibility at least: that this

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Tribute to Retiring Head of ERO — Dr Aitken

The secondary teachers' union hates her, radio talkback hosts ridicule her, boards of trustees fear her. She is unelected, unloved by many and unwelcome in the cloisters of mediocrity. She is, quite simply, the best thing in New Zealand education.

Judith Aitken, chief review officer for the schools' watchdog, the Education Review Office (ERO), is The National Business Review's New Zealander of the Year (1998).

Dr Aitken (61) joins an illustrious company of seven previous New Zealanders of the Year - people who are prepared to rattle cages and make things happen in a society that is increasingly reluctant to honour true heroes.

She is there on merit, honoured not as the first woman to receive NBR's unique Waitangi Day award - although she is our first female New Zealander of the Year - but because of her outstanding

contribution to society in 1998.

What then makes Dr Aitken, who retires this year, worthy of such recognition?

In short, she held the line and has done so since she was appointed chief review officer in 1992. No amount of bullying from teacher union heavies, badgering from the political-correctness lobby or hate-mail from aggrieved school boards or principals has weakened her resolve to maintain a benchmark for educational excellence.

Indeed, as time has gone on, Dr Aitken has got tougher with those schools or individuals unable or unwilling to meet ERO's exacting standards.

This is all the more surprising given her public-sector oriented education and career history (secondary teaching, Statistics Department, university lecturing, ECNZ corporate affairs and Ministry of Women's Affairs).

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speaker reckons "some" home education support groups "seriously undermine" the very "possibility of good home schooling opportunities". One then has to wonder if one's own support group is a target of this speaker's vilification.

But then we come to the phrase, "none monitored by the state", meaning our voluntary associations with and involvement in home education support groups are not monitored by the state. The very idea here is frightening in the extreme: that private families have their private meetings with other families for the purpose of encouraging one another in their common tasks of child rearing and education, that these meetings should be monitored by the state. In addition, it is stated that the lack of such monitoring "seriously undermines the possibility of good home schooling opportunities." It is hard to miss the impact of this assertion, if we are on the right track in deciphering this statement: state intervention is *essential* to ensure the maintenance of good home schooling opportunities!

Another possibility in our quest to understand exactly what the speaker was trying to say, is that it is the lack of state monitoring of the "very extreme and inferior" support groups *only* that undermines home schooling opportunities. So who then defines "extreme and inferior" and by what criteria? How could any *group* undermine home schooling opportunities anyway?....Ah, the light has just dawned! It is accomplished by comments from home schooling "spokespersons" which plant seeds of doubt in the public's and the government's mind as to the quality and effectiveness of the "130 support groups out there"!

Although the speaker's statement was convoluted and ambiguous, two things are undeniably evident: first, this speaker is quick to label certain home education views and services as extreme and inferior; second, this speaker invites and looks favourably upon state intervention into the private social lives of home educators. The first reveals a willingness (on the part of one who has variously claimed to speak for, represent and champion home schoolers) to publicly

cause schism among us and, further, to publicly cast aspersions upon, ridicule and criticise fellow home educators. The second reveals a political willingness to send Big Brother into the midst of us home schoolers' personal and private lives, a willingness reminiscent of lately-demised East European political regimes, but diametrically opposed to almost everything home educators hold dear.

Both articles actually went on to declare how well home educators perform on the whole. Some things simply cannot remain hidden nor easily succumb to criticism.

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Aitken

A glance at her curriculum vitae would give a prospective employer the impression she is a rampant feminist and the arch-angel of PC. If Dr Aitken is, she's certainly hidden it well at ERO.

Take her comments about teachers last year: "There are ... many teachers who have been in their schools for a very long time. Such principals and teachers have become unenthusiastic and demotivated, yet they continue to be employed."

Or her call for school boards of poor-performing schools in South Auckland to "bite the bullet" and sack incompetents: "These schools are part of a chronic situation where the calibre of teaching is not sufficient."

Or her swipe at Otago Boys' High School, ticked off for its bullying tradition: "I would not send a son knowingly to any school that had recently had a report of this kind."

Or her review of education in the Far North: "We were alarmed at the much larger proportion of schools [41%] ... which we found to be either poor or inadequate."

Or her prescription for the "capable teacher" - one who: encouraged co-operation and respect among students; kept up to date in subjects, resources, technology and teaching theory; planned programmes according to students' needs, abilities and progress; offered feedback; managed time efficiently; had an orderly, friendly and tidy classroom; kept students safe from physical and emotional harm; consulted and supported colleagues; took part in after-school activities; pronounced Maori accurately and understood the ramifications of the Treaty of Waitangi; and never took advantage of their relationship with students.

That prescription, hardly Dickensian, led the primary 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.

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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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union, the NZEI, to accuse ERO of having a secret agenda to supplant the Teacher Registration Board. The secondary teachers' union, the PPTA, went further, suggesting its release was linked to teachers' pay talks with the government.

But what really riled her most trenchant critics was her assertion the private sector should be the yardstick for measuring the performance of state schools.

She lamented the loss of private schools (she went to one herself), blaming generous government incentives for the decision of many to integrate with the state system.

That won praise from the executive director of the Independent Schools' Council, Jan Kerr, but almost nobody else.

Ms Kerr said she was pleased ERO had identified the issue, adding if there wasn't an independent school sector, there would be "no check on the state system".

Dr Aitken receives considerable praise from parents, the true clients who pay for education, but she is otherwise demonised for her efforts. She has survived because of sheer ability and a background and career beyond reproach from Wellington's stropky feminist elite.

As a former chief executive of the

Ministry of Women's Affairs with a longstanding commitment to gender equity, she can't be accused of being captured by her minister, the Business Roundtable or what the academics like to describe as the new right. Having impeccable PC credentials herself, she is in a stronger position than most to attack PC's inner sanctum, state-run education.

(Graeme Hunt, "Aitken holds the line against mediocre teaching and PC", *National Business Review*, 5 Feb 1999, p. 4.)

(Editorial Comment: The editor and Wellington home education leader Christina Coward once had the privilege of spending an hour with Dr Aitken, and found her to be most pleasant, clear thinking, fair and very straight-shooting. It was she who encouraged us as parents teaching our children at home to make a clear distinction between "schooling" and "education", noting that in New Zealand "schooling" is compulsory whereas in many other countries "education" rather than "schooling" is compulsory.

This is an issue which we home educators can address with hope of changing the legislation: the present government has extended the response date on its discussion document "Legislation for Learning" from December to March 2000. Make sure you get a copy of this document and respond to it:

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 Pvt Bag 1666
 Wellington

Ph.: (04) 473-5544

Fax: (04) 473-6539

Email: lfl@minedu.govt.nz

www.minedu.govt.nz/schools/lfl

Note the teachers' response to informed criticism. Dr Aitken and the Independent Schools' Council both note with concern how large amounts of money have removed private education as a check on the state system. We home educators are the only ones left to give state schools any truly independent competition; meaning we too must beware of compromising for money.)

TEACH Bulletin Opinion Poll #4

(Please tick ✓ one answer for each question.)

1. If the MoE stopped paying me the supervisory allowance:
a () I would continue to home school anyway.
b () I might have to re-think whether to continue home schooling or not.
c () I would definitely have to stop home schooling.

2. Whose responsibility is it to see that children get an education?
a () parents and/or family
b () the community or society as a whole via private enterprise, state schools or whatever system works
c () the civil government; the state
d () a and b together
e () b and c together
f () a and c together

3. Who should pay for the education of children (up through secondary level)?
a () parents and/or family
b () the community or society as a whole via private enterprise, state schools or whatever system works
c () the civil government; the state
d () a and b together
e () b and c together
f () a and c together

4. A spokesperson for a NZ home schooling organisation was quoted in a local press release this month (November 1999) as saying they "would welcome more ERO reviews beyond the initial one done at six months." Would you agree with this speaker's statement?
a () Yes
b () No
c () Don't Know/Not Sure

5. A spokesperson for a NZ home schooling organisation was quoted in a national publication which appeared this month as saying: "There are over 130 support groups out there, with a myriad of views and services, some very extreme and inferior, none monitored by the state. This seriously undermines the possibility of good home schooling opportunities." Are you happy for spokespersons of home schooling organisations to criticise other home schoolers to the national press in this manner?
a () Yes
b () No
c () Don't Know/Not Sure

6. Are you able to specifically name and locate any "very extreme and inferior support groups" in New Zealand?
a () Yes
b () No
c () Don't Know/Not Sure

7. Do you agree that the lack of state monitoring of home schooling support groups "seriously undermines the possibility of good home schooling opportunities"?
a () Yes
b () No
c () Don't Know/Not Sure

8. Do you agree that this spokesperson's statement itself may "seriously undermine the possibility of good home schooling opportunities" by perhaps giving the Ministry of Education enough cause for concern that it would tighten up on the granting of exemption certificates?
a () Yes, especially if they repeat statements like this again
b () No
c () Don't Know/Not Sure

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