

Two Big Issues for Home Educators

Background

The MoE proposed some changes to the exemption application form at the end of June this year. A few draft copies of these proposed changes leaked out with the covering note that the changes were to be finalised by the end of the week. When it was found that the MoE had not widely consulted with home educators regarding these changes, as previous MoE staff had always assured us they would do, the MoE was flooded with hundreds of prickly emails, MPs were alerted and even the media took an interest.

The MoE relented somewhat and re-drafted the changes. They said they'd receive submissions on this new draft from home education organisations (implying they did not want to hear from individuals) until the end of September. Then they changed it to the end of October. The latest is that they'll receive submissions until the end of November. (Lengthy comments on this draft were printed in *TEACH Bulletin 82*, June 2004, and the Editor again gives some suggestions for submissions later in this article under "Comments on Draft Exemption Application".)

That is the first issue that needs action by home educators.

Home educators met with MoE staff in Christchurch, Wellington and Auckland with mixed results. A common problem is that the MoE staff, understandably, have a difficult time seeing things from our perspective. They are mystified why we would get so worked up over the wording of an exemption application form. But when this form is the

only point of contact between us as parents and the MoE, and when the MoE has the power to force our children out of our homes, thoroughly disrupting our family's chosen lifestyle, by the mere stroke of a pen, by some subjective judgement by a total stranger to our families as to how well we relate educationally to our own children...when this happens, is it really any mystery why we get so excited about proposed changes to this exemption application form? No, it is not. The real mystery is how we home educators have managed to remain so calm and collected.

Learners Need Conversation Over Computers

Those who vaunt computer-aided learning are misguided. They are, by and large, people who do not themselves fly F16 fighters in the local video games parlour. Frankly, if you can't meet the gold standard of the entertainment business, and the education business never can, then why feebly compete?

I think that today's kids are visually saturated and not easily impressed by computer technology. What can impress them is effective personal interaction, practical experience and the stimulation of their imagination. We need to put back what has been removed from their play as children. They need conversation, they need direct experience of nature and the world,

But then the MoE sent out a letter to many home educators. Our family received one from Kay Phillips at MoE head office and also one from the Minister of Education himself, Trevor Mallard. This letter clearly sets out the MoE's new policy in regards to how it proposes to deal with home educators from here onwards.

This one letter raised a large number of fearful and contentious issues. (It is dealt with at length in *TEACH Bulletin 83*, July 2004.)

How we respond to the proposals in this letter is the second big issue faced by home educators.

Comments on Draft Exemption Application

First, here are the editor's positive and negative comments about the draft exemption application.

and they need effective teaching from inspired individuals with all the subtlety and nuance that only real human beings can provide.

The basis of learning is apprenticeship — the small tutorial, one on one, one on two, the master and the apprentice. If you want to understand something really well, then try to teach it. Apprenticeship is about students learning alongside their teacher, working together with the master. It is a mutual dialogue and the ultimate aim is for the apprentice to exceed the performance of the master.

(Excerpts from 2004 R.D. Batt Lecture by Professor Paul Callaghan, Massey University, 8 October. Edited by Craig Smith.)

These comments are condensed and, after much further thought, different in places to my earlier comments as they appeared in *TEACH Bulletin* 82:

Commendations

1. The information letter now clarifies that a request for additional information is not a refusal of the exemption.

2. They've added that local support groups may be able to help one prepare for an ERO review.

3. Making no change to 3.2.3.2 — "Describe your knowledge and understanding of the broad curriculum areas you intend to cover as you educate your child." While the language is sometimes unfamiliar to those outside the school system, it is clear and acknowledges in the phrase "you intend to cover" that the home educator is not obliged to follow the National Curriculum Framework (NCF).

4. Statement 3.2.3.3 "Outline what you intend to cover with your child in different areas of your stated curriculum" would seem to help elicit the kind of information MoE offices are looking for; the kind of informa-

tion that most often causes applications to be sent back to parents with a request for more information.

5. They've stated in 3.2.3.3 that the NCF is not compulsory but is included only as a guide.

6. Statement 3.2.3.4 about teaching methods seems very reasonable and addresses clearly and directly what the Act requires: as assessment of teaching.

7. The statement that a sample timetable is required was dropped.

8. Definitions of regular and well in Appendix A are brilliant: account is made of maturity level and ability of child and total avoidance of any reference to learning outcomes, accurately reflecting the concerns of the Act.

Objections

1. Although the "updating information" statement in information letter that accompanies exemption applications has been used for a few years already, it says, "From time to time you may be asked to provide the MoE with an update of your homeschooling programme." Theoretically this could amount to a whole new exemption application. It raises the issue of the MoE's interpretation of Section 21 of the Education Act that they need to be not just "satisfied" but satisfied on an on-going basis. Once the exemption is issued, according to the Act, the child is exempt until he turns 16 or the MoE revokes the exemption. That can only happen after an ERO review. There is no provision in the Act for "updates", so we should object to them.

2. Statement 3.2.3.1 says: "Describe your child's educational needs." This request is far too ambiguous, subjective and personal as well as being outside

what is required by the Act. It should be dropped.

3. Statement 3.2.3.1 on special needs is unclear. The first draft had a sufficient statement which also alerted applicants to the fact that the Act specifically addresses the exemption of children with special needs. The statement read, "In accordance with S21(1)(b) of the Education Act 1989 please describe any special educational needs of your child including a special education assessment and report if applicable." Adopt this statement.

4. Final part of statement 3.2.3.3, "you should be specific about the skills you want your child to learn and you should be clear about the maturity level and abilities of your child in relation to your curriculum" is fishing for information not required to satisfy the Act's requirements that the child be "taught at least as regularly and well as in a registered school." Learning outcomes do not need to be specified, maturity levels and abilities do not need to be described. This should be dropped, for it is the teaching, not the learning, that is being assessed in the application.

5. Although Statement 3.2.6 "Describe study area in the home..." has been there for many years, it is superfluous and unnecessary as it is outside the requirements of the Act. It should be dropped.

6. Statement 3.2.8 about social contact has also been there for years and is still as irrelevant to and totally outside of the requirements of the Act as ever. It is time to drop it.

7. The first part of statement 3.2.8 has been there for years — "Outline how you are going to assess and evaluate the progress your child is making" — but needs to be dropped as it is the teaching, not the learning that is being assessed and evaluated. The second part, newly added in this draft — "Please include how you will also evaluate your teaching methods" — is accurately addressing the concerns of the Act: evaluating the teaching. But the final phrase, "in terms of your children's learning" is again outside the Act's requirements and should be dropped.

TEACH Bulletin

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All correspondence to:

The Editor, Craig S. Smith
PO Box 9064
Palmerston North
New Zealand
Ph.: (06) 357-4399
Fax: (06) 357-4389
hedf@xtra.co.nz

www.hef.org.nz

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

8. The exemption application includes a privacy statement which I personally consider unacceptable. It says, "The personal information collected by the Ministry on this form is for the purposes of assessing your application for exemption from enrolment at a registered school. The information collected may be used by or disclosed to other agencies, such as the ERO, the principal of your child's school or (in the case of a child who has never attended school) the Public Health Nurse, for these purposes. Your information will not be disclosed to any other person or agency unless it is authorised or required by law."

I've written to Kay Phillips in August, September and again in October asking more pointed questions about this privacy statement each time. No replies at all so far. Here are my latest questions:

Is the MoE authorised by law to pass on this information to either principals or to public health nurses? Is it a blanket authorisation or restricted to certain instances? Please refer me to the exact statute, section and sub-sections that give the MoE this legal authorisation.

Can you please confirm or correct my understanding that the reason the MoE may pass on this information to a principal or a public health nurse is to flush out any suspicions the principal or health nurse may have in regards to the family making the exemption application?

How, specifically, does personal information collected by the MoE in the exemption application further the purpose of assessing the application by being passed on to the Public Health Nurse? How does the Public Health Nurse help the MoE assess whether the child will be taught at least as regularly and well as in a registered school?

I don't think it wise for us home educators to let this kind of information passing become established without some clear answers from the MoE as to whether they even have the legal right to do it.

Submissions will be received by the MoE until the end of November.

Post them to Kay Phillips, kay.phillips@minedu.govt.nz, PO Box 1666, Wellington. She should also provide you with a copy of the draft exemption application. Or you can view it at: www.hef.org.nz (Click: Latest from the MoE).

Comments on MoE Policy Letter

I'll only deal with two issues raised by this letter, as I've dealt with it at length in *TEACH Bulletin* 83, July 2004.

Safe Surroundings

The letter says, "Homeschoolers and the Ministry share a common interest in ensuring all students given an exemption from regular schooling are successfully educated and that this occurs in safe surroundings."

My questions (asked of the MoE in August, September and October with no reply as yet) are what the MoE means by "safe surroundings", do they plan to assess our homes to see if they comply and whether the MoE has any legal authority to make such enquiries into private residencies.

Divide and Conquer

The letter further states: "The direction of education policy in NZ and elsewhere is seeing much greater transparency and focus on outcomes — broadly defined — and a greater focus on what constitutes effective learning and how it is supported in a range of different contexts...None of this seeks to convey any sense of curriculum regulation but highlights the need for homeschoolers, the Education Review Office and the Ministry to progressively develop greater shared understandings about learning outcomes and other dimensions of quality."

It seems clear the MoE is now planning to focus on learning outcomes, an area which, according to Section 21 of the Education Act, is outside the MoE's legitimate sphere of enquiry in regards to exempted students. I have written to ask why we "need" to sit down with the MoE and the ERO to "develop greater shared understandings about learning out-

comes" when a) the MoE's own working definition of "well" in its Home Schooling Desk File cautiously steers clear of learning outcomes; b) Section 21 of the Education Act only requires that the child be "taught at least as regularly and well as in a registered school" and makes no reference to learning outcomes; and c) the ERO has stated that there is no statutory requirement for any child to be well taught.

My concern is that some home educators will think it is great that we apparently are being invited to sit down with the MoE and ERO and together hammer out some shared understandings. I fear that these could become a list of outcomes *some* home educators *voluntarily* agree to abide by on behalf of all other home educators present and future, even when there is no statutory requirement to do so. My fear is that this kind of thing could be used by the MoE to divide and conquer home educators. We must respect and vigorously defend each other's uniqueness and not expect other families to adopt our standards nor try to use the state's power to force fellow home educators to conform to ways with which we happen to agree.

One argument in favour of establishing agreed upon "standards" or "outcomes", arguments even put forward by home educators, says that "illiterate" and "intellectually incapable" parents surely cannot be allowed to home educate.

My immediate question is: Who decides whether the parents are either of these things? There are plenty of people who would say I am not intellectually capable because I believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. Looking at the track record of the NZ state school system which has contributed to the fact that today 46% of adult NZers are barely literate,¹ I personally will not accept any ruling on literacy by the MoE.

Listen to an experienced NZ home educating mum answer this argument:

I think there are two issues raised. The first is which is more impor-

tant: academics or character? While no one likes to think that a home educated child would end up illiterate because his parents cannot or can barely read or write, it's happening all the time in the case of children who have spent 11 years in school. But what's more tragic is that the character of these children is either stunted or in complete tatters. Had these children been left at home to be caring, hard-working members of a family and of a community, they could still be salt-of-the-earth, productive citizens, despite the considerable handicap of not being able to read nor write. I venture to suggest that, had their parents been allowed to home educate them, both the parents and the children would have ended up with a higher standard of literacy than in the situation where the exemption was declined and the child is sentenced to 10 years of social destruction.

On principle, I'd be more focused on the parents' willingness to be a family and to help their children than on the standard of their literacy. In no way do I want to denigrate the importance of literacy. However, I have two children who only just get by as far as reading is concerned, and really struggle with writing, but are able to hold down jobs admirably and are productive members of society. And one of them has more wisdom and focus than many academics. Wisdom and usefulness are not dependent on academics.

The second issue is the vexed question, Whose children are they? The state has no right to refuse caring parents the right to bring up and train their children at home. If the law implies that it does, then there is something far wrong either with the law or with the bureaucrats' interpretation of the law. It's past time the state knew its place and got its meddling nose out of our families. If it has handicapped parents by sending them into the world illiterate, should it then have the "responsibility" of ruining their families too? Our children are our responsibility, not the state's.

Another argument, also from a NZ home educating mum:

I think of my teenaged daughter applying for an exemption for her future children. She'd be a lovely responsible mother who would certainly make up for the years she lost by learning diligently along with her children. And she'd teach them the value of hard work and right priorities, and wouldn't put up with nonsense. But she'd find it well nigh impossible to fill in their stupid exemption form to the MoE's satisfaction, and she might be faced with the agony of seeing her children forced to go to an institution, knowing that it was an institution of this kind which compromised her learning and her social and spiritual development. And I think of certain HERS liaising with the MoE, nodding their heads wisely when the MoE insisted that unless you had the academic ability to fill out this application (which has people with university degrees scratching their heads), you shouldn't be considered fit to home educate. And I think of other HERS who want the fence to be made higher for the sake of the home education public image. When I think of these things, I feel really alarmed.

It seems there are many dangers with wanting to collaborate with the MoE and ERO. The main danger is compromising a principle which seems far too important and precious for us parents to compromise: **the education and training of our children is the responsibility of us parents, not that of the state.** Collaborating with state agencies immediately lets them in the door; it lets them put a hand on the steering wheel, it allows huge state agencies on-going advisory input into running private family affairs. Why is that bad? Because state agencies by definition push political agendas: political agendas care nothing for private families but only for conformity to their ideology. If their agenda for your children is different from yours, you will be the one forced to concede. Resist now while we have the opportunity.

Note:

1. See Ministry of Social Development's Social Report of August 2004 at <http://tinyurl.com/462ow>.

The Language Police, Part 2

[Summary of Part 1 which appeared in *TEACH Bulletin 81* of May 2004: When author Diane Ravitch served on the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), she discovered that school textbook publishers operated according to strict Bias and Sensitivity Guidelines.]

Strict application of these guidelines entails the exclusion of classic literature from reading textbooks. Neither the Riverside nor the Macmillan-McGraw Hill nor the Scott Foresman-Addison Wesley guidelines require that a certain proportion of textbooks be set aside for classic literature. None requires that stories and poems by significant nineteenth and twentieth century writers be included, even if they do not meet the letter of the bias rules. After all, few, if any, classic children's authors can meet the requirements of the textbook guidelines. Most of them were unaware of the need for balanced demographic representation. Most of them also assumed that children could imagine worlds that were very different from those they had personally experienced.

That helps to explain why so many American children now arrive in college without ever having read anything by writers such as Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ralph Ellison, Joseph Conrad, Willa Cather, W. E. B. Du Bois, Jack London, Edith Wharton, John Steinbeck, Richard Wright, George Orwell or Charles Dickens. Insofar as such writers flunk the tests laid out by textbook publishers, they risk slipping quietly out of circulation.

Even when great works of literature are taught, they are often taught carelessly in an effort to purge the reading experience of potentially disturbing difficulties. First year university students often assume that all theories and opinions are of equal value, regardless of the facts of the case. They proclaim, "My high-school teacher told me that a poem can mean anything I want it to mean." Unable to imagine the concerns of other people living in other times, these students have been taught instead to express invariably their *own* concerns when

confronted with any given cultural artifact: whether the text is the Bible, Shakespeare or Toni Morrison, students read only themselves over and over, with the predictable results that the greater their ignorance the higher their self-esteem.

With exceptions mainly accounted for by idiosyncratic teachers and elite schools, a disturbing pattern has emerged from the reforms of recent decades: a curriculum without content — and a new consensus that only this kind of curriculum can properly meet the needs of modern American society.

Given the concentration of ownership in the textbook industry, in which a small number of publishers dominate sales across the nation, the new censors wield enormous power. A few publishing officials determine what words and subjects are suitable for consumption in a great many of the nation's classrooms. If they hope to work for the educational publishing industry, writers and illustrators must follow the guidelines with care.

As the sensitivity rules have become more onerous, some writers and illustrators have simply given up. Some years ago, the *New York Times* described the case of an artist who had stopped accepting assignments to illustrate children's textbooks after receiving a ten page, single-spaced document specifying the guidelines for a single story. "The hero was a Hispanic boy," the artist explained to the *Times*; "there were black twins, one boy, one girl; an overweight Oriental boy, and an American Indian girl. That leaves the Caucasian. Since we mustn't forget the physically handicapped, she was born with a congenital malformation and only had three fingers on one hand. . . . They also had a senior citizen, and I had to show her jogging."

Current textbook guidelines have an insidious effect not just on writers and artists, but on the integrity of the texts themselves. Dr. William Bennetta, who edits *The Textbook Letter*, has identified numerous instances in which textbooks have sacrificed accuracy of content for multicultural consciousness-raising.

The Educational Testing Service currently recommends avoiding certain topics that allegedly lower the test scores of female, African American and Hispanic American students. Topics to be avoided include the military and sports. Also to be avoided are questions that use a specialized vocabulary to test a student's knowledge of farming, finance, law, politics, science, technology, tools and transportation. Ironically, researchers have consistently failed to demonstrate that students who are female, African American and Hispanic will get higher scores if these topics are eliminated.

Debates over the content of America's textbooks and educational tests have, of course, been raging for many years now. But what is not at all well understood, even by the educated public, is the extent of the censorship imposed by the bias and sensitivity standards that currently prevail. Even worse, the range of forbidden knowledge seems to just keep growing — as I discovered during my tenure on the NAGB.

After our board approved various reading passages, based on their quality and suitability, they were forwarded to a bias and sensitivity review panel. This panel recommended the deletion of several passages we had approved. Two of the passages selected for deletion were about peanuts. One focused on the history of the peanut (with particular attention to the scientific contributions of George Washington Carver) and the other on the peanut's nutritional value. The bias panel objected to the first passage because it included a statement that peanuts were exported from Brazil after Portuguese explorers defeated many tribes. (The bias reviewers believed that this wording would offend someone, but I wasn't sure whom: maybe people who don't like the word "tribe"? People who object to the historical role of Portuguese explorers?) The second passage on peanuts bothered the bias panel because it neglected to mention that some people are allergic to peanuts.

The bias panel also proposed to

drop a passage about a heroic blind mountain climber because it implied that people who are blind are worse off than sighted people and have a more difficult time facing dangers like mountain climbing. The bias panel wanted to kill an informative story about the life of African American educator Mary McLeod Bethune because it did not approve of the name of the school she founded in Daytona, Florida, in 1904: the Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute for Negro Girls. The reviewers thought African American children might be offended by the school's name. A fable by Aesop in which the clever Fox persuaded the vain Crow to drop her cheese was rejected as gender biased. The panel also proposed deletion of a charming story in which a rotting stump in the forest, which served as home to successive groups of insects, birds, snakes and small animals, was compared to an apartment house. The bias panel found the analogy demeaning and claimed that it might reinforce stereotypes about apartment dwellers, or even trigger a negative emotional response among children living in housing projects.

This sort of censorship has no end. Only the blandest, least controversial, and ultimately least interesting passages can pass through such a fine filter. The only authors likely to pass muster consistently are those who have been commissioned to write to order for these textbooks. This is an awfully weak foundation upon which to build a curriculum. How can we transmit our culture to the younger generation if we teach only what was written in the past dozen or so years? Is the culture created prior to 1970 so corrupt that it should be locked away and forgotten? Should we allow our cultural heritage to be hijacked by a handful of self-righteous pedagogical censors?

It would not be too big a stretch to assert that the McGuffey readers of the nineteenth century contained not only better literature than our own bowdlerized texts, but also more honest writing about the realities of contemporary society — poverty, crime, unemployment, class differences and social injustice. By ensur-

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Coming Events

Sun, 28 November 2004

Waikato Education Expo

Venue: Hamilton Boys High School Hall, Peachgrove Road, Hamilton

Cost: no more than \$2 per family

Contact:

www.eduexpo.bravehost.com

Details

NZ-wide retailers of a wide range of educational resources, curricula and "toys" showing their wares. Informative and hands-on.

Tue-Fri, 18-21 Jan 2005

Code Blue

Christian Worldview Conference

Venue: Willowpark, Auckland

Contact: Carol: Ph. (09) 410-3933, Email cesbooks@intouch.co.nz

Keynote speakers:

Dr R C Sproul, Jr.: A graduate of Reformed Theological Seminary, and Grove City College. He received his D.Min. from Whitefield Theological Seminary. R.C. is the editor of *Tabletalk* magazine, associate pastor of teaching of Saint Peter Presbyterian Church, and the director of the Highlands Study Center. He has written or edited nine books, including *Almighty Over All*, *Tearing Down Strongholds*, *Bound for Glory*, *Christian Economics*, and *Eternity in Our Hearts*. At the Highlands Study Center, R.C. teaches the Tuesday Night Bible study for the community, most of the Highlands Academy classes, the resident students, and serves as senior editor of *Every Thought Captive*. He and his wife Denise are a Home-schooling family with seven children.

Paul Henderson: A writer and researcher for the Maxim institute. He was born in the UK and is a graduate of the Universities of Aberdeen and Cambridge.

Lewis Meyer: Has a BSc in Biochemistry, author of four small books including *Evolution or Factor X?* Is well known for speaking in secondary schools

against evolution.

Michael Drake: Principal of Carey College and has been involved in Christian education for over twenty years. Author of the booklet *The New Maori Myth*.

Programme

Day One: Tue, 18 January 2005

7:45 pm: SALT AND LIGHT: The need for a Christian Worldview - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.

Day Two: Wed, 19 January 2005

9:00 am: SIMPLE (Part 1): One Lord, one worldview - Dr. R. C. Sproul, Jr.

11:00 am: Worldviews in the current political scene in New Zealand - Paul Henderson (Maxim Institute)

2:00 pm: The Christian Worldview and Maori Culture - Michael Drake

7:45 pm: SIMPLE (Part 2): How our worldview impacts our priorities - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.

Day Three: Thurs, 20 Jan 2005

9:00 am: SEPARATE (Part 1): Recognizing false worldviews - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.

11:00 am: The Creation Factor - Lewis Meyer

2:00 pm: Debate

7:45 pm: SEPARATE (Part 2): A City on a Hill: the distinctiveness of a Christian Worldview - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.

Day Four: Fri, 21 January 2005

9:00 am: DELIBERATE (Part 1): The deceitfulness of humanism - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.

11:00 am: DELIBERATE (Part 2): The importance of presuppositions - Dr. R.C. Sproul, Jr.

Cost :

Option 1: Live-in pass (includes all lectures, accommodation, and all meals)
\$185 per adult
\$170 per student

Option 2: Full conference non live-in pass (includes all lectures, morning/afternoon teas, lunch, and dinner)
\$100 per adult
\$85 per student

Option 3: One Day pass (for ONE day, includes all lectures, morning/afternoon teas, lunch, and dinner)

Standard fee: \$35

Option 4: Evening pass: (includes all evening lectures)

Standard fee: \$25

Organizing Committee:

Mark and Carol Munroe
Rodger and Christine Whetton
Craig and Barbara Smith

Mon, 31 Jan 2005

5th Annual Home Education Celebration

Venue: Auckland venue to be confirmed

Contact: Dawn Burgin burgins.of.auckland@xtra.co.nz

Time: 11am-3pm

Co-ordinated by Auckland Home Educators Inc

A popular gathering of 200+ parents, kids & supporters. Let's see how big we can make it for 2005! Fabulous opportunity to mix 'n mingle, buy/sell resources, enjoy a sense of belonging, play games, etc. If you're investigating the Home Education option, come and see first-hand what we're all about. Also refer to the poster in your local library & check out our website at www.home-education.org.nz

(Continued from page 5: **Police**)

ing that students never read anything that might possibly offend them, current textbook guidelines reinforce a sugar-coated and narcissistic view of culture, as if books and poems and historical narratives were ephemeral commodities — meant mainly to make us all feel better about ourselves.

(Edited by Genevieve Smith from an essay by Diane Ravitch entitled *Education after the Culture Wars*. Ravitch also authored *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn.*)

(Continuing)