



Lobbying in NSW: What's been happening???

The last few months have been really busy for lobbying in NSW and home educators from across the State and indeed, from all over Australia, have been involved. This update will detail what has happened and point towards future lobbying plans.

Letter writing to members of Parliament

Many home educators and their friends and family have written to members of parliament about the changes in registration processes. Some home educators have also met with their local MP and have discussed their concerns. MPs have raised these issues with the Minister for Education, Adrian Piccoli, who (as we expected) forwarded these letters on to the Office of the Board of Studies (OBoS). OBoS formulated replies to these letters. These replies were universally unsatisfactory but again, that was expected. However, these letters have had some impact in that the OBoS has been placed under significant pressure from the Minister's Office.

Questions of the Premier and Education Minister at "community cabinet" meetings

The Premier and his Ministers regularly convene cabinet meetings at locations other than NSW Parliament House in order to hear the views of real people in the community at community forums associated with these meetings. Groups of home educators have attended some of these community forums and have asked questions of the Premier and the Education Minister about the changes in the home education registration process. At these meetings home educators asked the Education Minister to meet with HEA representatives to discuss the concerns within the home education community.

Meeting of HEA representatives with the Minister for Education

As a result of the letter writing campaign and the questions at community cabinet forums, the Minister for Education agreed to a meeting with HEA representatives. This meeting was held on the 30 October at NSW Parliament House. Four HEA representatives attended, as did David Murphy (Deputy Director of the Office of the Board of Studies), and several advisors to the Minister. Whilst the meeting was scheduled for 30 minutes, the Minister only attended for about 10 minutes. It was clear that both the Minister and David Murphy had been poorly informed of the concerns of home educators, both were of the view that the main issue was an objection to the implementation of the National Curriculum. It was also evident that the Minister currently sees home educators as enemies in his desire to ensure that every child receives a quality education. He doesn't really understand home educators or home education. Much time was spent speaking with David Murphy however, he maintained that there had not been any changes made in the registration process for home educators. At this meeting he was presented with examples, and he has since flatly denied that such changes exist. For example, he was told about the reduction in the minimum registration period from six to three months but has since stated in writing that there was never a minimum registration period (this is despite a minimum six month registration period being described in the 2011 Information Pack). Both the Minister and David Murphy denied that there was widespread concern about the home education registration process in NSW.

Those who have recently written to their MP or the Minister may have received a reply that mentions this meeting and describes it as "extremely productive" - nothing could be further from the truth.

Meetings with the Christian Democratic Party (CDP) Member, Paul Green

Many home educators have written to the CDP members of the Legislative Council Fred Nile and Paul Green. Paul Green has taken on the concerns of home educators and has shown himself to be a strong supporter. He has requested meetings with several members of the HEA and as a result of these meetings, Paul Green or Fred Nile have asked a total of three questions in question time in the Legislative Council of the Minister about home education. These questions have placed further pressure upon the Minister and the OBoS. The concerns of home educators were also raised by the CDP with the Government in discussions surrounding recent changes to the Education Act. Given that the CDP hold the balance of power in the Legislative Council, the Government must keep in mind the concerns of the CDP because they often cannot pass legislation without their support. Paul Green has indicated that they will continue to support home educators.

Meetings with other Members of Parliament

Many home educators have met with their local MPs to discuss the changes in home education registration. Reports of these meetings given to the HEA are that many MPs have not really known anything about home education but have been willing to learn. Many MPs have been really sympathetic to the concerns of home educators. Some MPs have found it difficult to understand the problems in registration that are reflected in the new Information Pack. In such instances giving them more concrete examples of poor treatment within the system (for example, exclusion of home educated children from programs available to school children or absence of any representative of home educators on the Board of Studies) has assisted them to understand how and why the regulatory environment has become untenable.

Home Education Petition

A petition asking the NSW Government to withdraw the 2013 Information Pack and associated policies and to engage in broad consultation with the home education community was put together by home educators on the Central Coast and supported by the HEA. The goal was to obtain 10 000 signatures on the petition which would mean that Parliament would have to discuss our petition for 15 minutes. Many hundreds of home educators from across Australia were involved in collecting signatures for this petition. It was hoped that 10 000 signatures could be collected before the end of the Parliamentary year but it became evident that tabling the petition in the last few weeks of Parliament would not give our concerns the justice they deserved (MPs were very focussed on pushing legislation through before the end of the year). It is therefore planned to table the petition early in the new Parliamentary year in late February or early March. This later tabling will also give us time to do further work with our MPs so that they can provide a knowledgeable response to the petition.

The impact of lobbying

Very many home educators have been involved in lobbying in NSW and because we have worked together we have already had some success. For example, the OBoS have backed away from some of their most extreme new requirements. As described in the Home Education Information Pack Q&A published on their website <http://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/parents/home-schooling-info-qa.html> they now state that parents do not have to seek approval to teach their children beyond the years of registration on the registration certificate. They also now state that children can be registered for “primary” or “secondary” education rather than a particular year.

They also now state that activities that occur outside of the home can be included in a child’s education program, although they still maintain that education must be “primarily delivered in the home.”

Most significantly, they have just begun to back away from the issue that has caused most problems for home educators- the insistence on using the outcomes of the NSW Syllabus in the planning, assessment and reporting of educational programs. The latest version of the OBoS Q&A states *“There are a number of ‘entry points’ to Board syllabuses for parents in developing the child’s educational program. For example, a parent may demonstrate engagement with Board syllabuses through the*

integration of syllabus outcomes into the educational program. Alternatively, or in addition, a parent may use the syllabus stage statements as the basis for planning the educational program; or the parent use syllabus content to demonstrate that the educational program is based on relevant Board of Studies syllabuses."

It is worth noting that while the Q&A backs away from some of the changes in the registration process the OBoS has fundamentally not changed their attitude towards home education and home educators. Structural issues that led to the untenable changes in the registration process remain and so it is important that we continue our lobbying efforts. We need to ensure that this cannot happen again and we need to work towards a much better system for all home educators in NSW.

For those who will be undergoing registration soon, the HEA has provided some recommendations at <http://www.hea.edu.au/getting-started/state-by-state/nsw/> It is important to know that not everyone undergoing registration is experiencing difficulties. Very many people are having no problems at all. It seems to be newer home educators, especially those who have removed children from school because of bullying or because the child has learning needs that the school has been unable to meet, who are having the most difficulty. However, the problem is not exclusive to new home educators, we continue to hear from long term home educators who have been surprised to receive very short registration periods.

If you want to be more involved in lobbying please contact the HEA lobbying team at lobbying@hea.asn.au. Most of the lobbying is organised via Facebook

What next??

Over the next few months we need to increase our lobbying efforts again. The HEA is going to be producing materials to help home educators and their family and supporters to be involved. At this point future areas of lobbying will include:

- Widening support in the Legislative Council (currently we have the strong support of the CDP, it would be very helpful to gain the support of the Greens. Any Greens supporters willing to help?)
- Engage the Shadow Minister of Education (he is brand new to the job and we don't know what his views are on home education- any home educators live in the electorate of Keira?)
- Meetings with MPs (we want everyone to attempt to meet with their MP to discuss this issue in person so that when the Liberal, Labor and National Party rooms formulate a response to the petition there will be many MPs who will speak up for us)
- Further letter writing (to keep the pressure on the Minister and the OBoS)
- Tabling of the petition (we get our issues front and centre in Parliament and we want lots of home educators there on the day in the gallery!)