



## **Guide for writing lobbying letters about home education changes in NSW**

The Home Education Association (HEA) is asking its members to assist in lobbying the Minister for Education to revert the home education registration policies and procedures to those that were in place prior to 2012 and to withdraw the 2013 Registration for Home Schooling in NSW Information Package (Information Package). The HEA cannot achieve this change on its own, but with the assistance of members we have a very good chance of success. The HEA has developed this letter writing guide and associated background document on the changes for the purpose of assisting members of the HEA, members of the wider home education community and other supporters of home education in understanding the changes in policy and in lobbying to have the policy changes withdrawn. The HEA encourages members to share this letter writing guide and background document with non-HEA members with the understanding that they are shared in their entirety. Those who wish to support the HEA in this area are also invited to become members of the HEA.

The way in which HEA members and others who support home education can assist in HEA's lobbying efforts is via the writing of letters to members of the NSW parliament, including members of the House of Representatives (MPs) and Members of the Senate. This form of lobbying has been extremely effective in the past. In 1998 home educators were faced with the possibility of legislation that would reduce flexibility in the practice of home education. The action of the home education community in writing to, and visiting, their members of parliament resulted in the legislation being withdrawn. Many parliamentarians who spoke in support of home education described letters they had received from home educating families and meetings they had had with home educators. These letters and visits had a huge impact (you can read these speeches yourself by going to <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/web/common.nsf/V3SearchSite?open&area=Hansard> and searching for "home schooling" keeping in quote marks).

The other impact that letters have is in calling attention to the issue at a broader level. When a member of the public writes a letter to their MP or Senator and asks for an issue to be addressed with the relevant minister, it sets up a chain of communication that creates "noise" that gets an issue noticed. Your letter to your MP or Senator will be sent to the Minister for Education, Andrew Piccoli. The Minister's Office will send it on to his Department or the Board of Studies who will write a reply for him. This reply will then be sent to your MP or Senator who will write back to you. The letter you receive in reply will likely appear quite unsatisfactory to you but that's OK. The process itself is what provides the Minister and his office with the understanding that there is a real problem. It would help the HEA in developing its strategy for lobbying to know what the letters contain. If you are willing to send a scan of the letter(s) you receive back through to the HEA. It is possible that your MP or Senators may take up this issue and become a champion, but even if they do not this is still OK. Your letter has served its purpose, which is to educate your MP or Senator and the Minister about home education and home educators and (in the volume of multiple letters sent from other home educators) to show them that there is a serious problem. When you receive a letter in reply it is great if you can reply to the issues raised in that letter, the whole chain will start up again. If you are able to meet with your MP and/or Senators to discuss these concerns, that will be very helpful in assisting them to understand home education and the problems that the community is facing. MPs keep diary space just for meeting with their constituents. In order to make an appointment it is necessary to ring their office and ask for one. MPs are often very approachable and interested in hearing about something that is different from the norm. It may be appropriate to take your children with you.

It is acceptable to send your letter to your MP via snail mail or email. However, if you send it via email you must include your address details in the email. It is also important that you include only a single address in the address bar. If you CC your email to any other address it will likely result in your email going into a junk or spam folder and it may not be read and acted upon.

You can find the name and contact details of your MP at

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/members.nsf/V3Home> If you are unsure of which electorate you live in a link on this page will take you to a search page where you can find this out. You can find the contact details for all senators at

<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/members.nsf/V3ListCurrentLCMembers> You can contact all senators if you wish, or only those from the political parties that you support. During the 1998 protest against home education regulations, Fred Nile of the Christian Democrats was a strong supporter of home educators and was instrumental in the withdrawal of the relevant legislation. We would recommend sending letters to Mr Nile because of his likely position as a champion of our cause and because he holds considerable power in the NSW parliament as holder of part of the balance of power in the Senate (this means that the government often needs his assistance in getting legislation passed, so it is in their best interests to keep him happy).

If you can encourage friends and family members who support you to write their own letter that is great! It may even be that other members of the community who are involved in your child's life (for example their scout leader, Sunday School teacher, or librarian) may be willing to write in support. We would encourage adult home educated children to also write. For some it may be easiest if you write the letter for them and give it to them to send. Again, these letters will assist members of parliament to understand home education and why the changes in policy of the Office of the Board of Studies (OBOs) are problematic and should be withdrawn. If a family member or friend is writing a letter about this issue it does not need to be as detailed. The letter can simply explain the relationship to the home educating family, describe how they can see home education has been good for those children, describe what a good job the home educating parents are doing, list the unacceptable changes and ask that the MP or Senator get the policies withdrawn while consultation proceeds. If you are an unregistered home educator and you do not feel that you are able to write to your MP or Senators for this reason, perhaps you could write a more lengthy letter detailing your experiences for a family member or friend to send to their MP or Senators. Such a letter, written as coming from your family member or friend will get your story and opinions heard by our parliamentarians but without identifying you.

HEA members have asked for assistance in writing to their members of parliament. Below is a description of the sort of letter that might be written. This is just a guide to assist you, there is no need to follow it to the letter and you may wish to write something entirely different! If you have limited time, a short letter is very worth doing, if you are able, a detailed letter will be better! **The most important thing in the letter is the request for the Minister to ensure that the new policies and information pack are withdrawn and consultation with home educators initiated.** If you have a problem with particular aspects you might wish to focus on these or you might wish to cover everything! Whilst some home educators believe that the government should not have any oversight of home education, *at this time* the HEA is not encouraging its members to lobby for removal of all oversight. We have been advised by multiple sources that such lobbying could negatively affect our ability to have the current policy changes reversed. Since our priority is to have the new policy changes withdrawn, we do not wish to encourage action that may undermine these efforts. The HEA is committed to ensuring that there is ongoing consultation and lobbying and thus we anticipate that there will be opportunities to seek reduced regulation in the future.

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### **Letter outline for protesting changes in home education registration in NSW**

Your address and contact details

Dear Mr/Ms NSW Member of House of Representatives/ Member of NSW Senate

Describe who you are, describe your family and your home education experience. If you have an educational or work background that you think that politicians might find impressive then insert that too. If you have children who have been home educated and successfully moved onto further study at TAFE, school or university or into a work career, then describe this.

Describe why you home educate, the excellence of the education you provide your children with, the style of approach, the sort of educational opportunities you provide your children with and your involvement in the wider community (this last bit is very important- many MPs and senators have stated in parliament that they believe that home education is not good because children are isolated from society). If any of your children have special needs as a result of a disability or medical condition or giftedness describe this and how home education has enabled you to meet their needs. If any of your children has attended school and has had difficulties that led to you deciding to home educate, for example, unresolved bullying, school refusal, inability to meet learning needs, etc, describe this. We would caution against wholesale or overt criticism of the school system or the NSW Syllabus. Doing so will only alienate those whose job it is to provide for school education in NSW including NSW MPs and Senators.

If this is the first time you have written to an MP about problems with home education registration state this.

Then describe your views of past practice in home education registration in NSW and your view of current practice. The objective here is to contrast past practice, which was much less onerous than the current practice. Your experience of past practice may have been that it was easy for you and you didn't have a problem with it or it may be that you have had negative experiences with some authorised persons or you have always objected to aspects of the registration process, the objective is to help your MP or Senator understand that there has been a change that is negatively affecting home educators.

Then describe the changes that have occurred. If you have been aware of changes in the registration process in your area (personally or via your friends), describe this. If you have only become aware that changes have been made with the publication of the new Information Pack then simply refer to that or do a combination of both your personal experience and your reaction to the information pack. Refer to the background paper that accompanies this letter writing guide for more information on how the policy changes are being applied. If you are able to write something about each of the changes, that will assist parliamentarians to understand that the breadth of the concern across the home education community.

As detailed in the background paper the changes include:

- Removal of recognition of different styles of home education from the 2013 Information Pack
- Addition of a requirement for home educators to provide written plan for recording, teaching and assessing that is linked to the outcomes of the NSW Syllabus
- Removal of registration via documentation
- Addition of a requirement to only teach to the years for which children are registered
- Change in the process so that initial registrations be a maximum 1 year and no minimum registration
- Addition of an allowance for "spot checks" of home educators
- Addition of a requirement that all home education occur in the home and be taught by the parent
- An overall reduction in flexibility
- Change in attitude from APs towards home educators
- Making registration for home education stressful and difficult

Describe the fundamental difference in approach between the OBoS and home educating parents that has emerged with the new policies. That is, home educating parents are fundamentally concerned with providing their children with a quality education, whereas the APs and OBoS are fundamentally concerned with ensuring compliance with their processes and procedures (and seemingly with ticking boxes). This does not require them to be interested in any way in the quality of the education being received, if the boxes are not ticked the education is not satisfactory. The gulf between what home educators perceive as important and what OBoS perceives as important has widened with these changes and that is what has resulted in so many problems. Describe how the 1990 Education Act places the responsibility for education with parents, with the State having the duty to ensure education is of a high quality. Argue that OBoS should be concerned with assessing the quality of the education that children are receiving, they should not be implementing burdensome procedures and should not be focussed on excessive regulation. Argue that home educators should not be treated as if they are at high risk of abusing or neglecting their children. Let your MP or Senator know that many registered home educators are considering how they might drop off the radar and become unregistered or leave the state in order to be able to home educate without the stress associated with registration in NSW.

Discuss how these changes in policy have been implemented without any evidence of a need for change. Pose the question, "What is the evidence base for these changes?" The OBOS is asking for home educators to invest significant time and efforts in complying with their policies without any evidence that this will improve the education of children.

Describe how these policy changes indicate that the OBoS lacks an understanding of how home education works. Describe how this is not surprising since the HEA has confirmed that the OBoS did not consult with any home education groups in the development or implementation of these policy changes.

Ask your MP or Senator to ask the minister to respond to your concerns and to direct the OBoS to withdraw the 2013 Information Pack and withdraw the policy changes that have been implemented since 2011. Ask your MP or Senator to ask the Minister to ensure that extensive consultation with home educators is initiated (and make it clear that such consultation can't occur until the policies have been withdrawn).

Thank your MP or Senator for their assistance and then sign your name!