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TO THE NSW BOARD OF STUDIES

Attention: Anne Keenan and David Murphy

cc. Bronwyn Hession - oBoS, Tamara Kelly -Home Education Association

The Home Education Network is the largest home education support group in Victoria and also has some members resident in NSW. This letter is in support of the call by our sister group, the Home Education Association, for the withdrawal of the information pack released in August.

NSW home educators are committed to education and enthusiastically support the pursuit of life-long learning. However, they are concerned this new information pack suggests a misunderstanding with what home education is and how it works and will restrict their ability to cater to their children's educational needs.

It is important to realise that home education is not simply a matter of reproducing the school system at home. Home education is innovative, intensive, individual, interactive and flexible. It is not confined to school hours, school days or school terms, nor is it confined to the home. It offers extensive opportunities for cross-age and cross-subject learning which are not available in the traditional classroom. The curriculum planning materials that the proposed registration process requires home educators to draw on have been designed for classroom use whereas home education, which is by its nature far more individual, requires greater flexibility.

Home educators have very grave and real concerns about the effect of the new registration arrangements on their ability to offer their children a high quality individualised education. It should be noted that similar registration regimes throughout Australia in the past have resulted in a high rate of non-registration and we suggest that the proposed procedure could have such an unintended consequence.

In support of NSW home educators, we identify our concerns as follows:

1. Home education is fundamentally different from schooling and the new information pack fails to recognise this.

There never has been, nor will there ever be, unanimity as to what students should learn, let alone one 'right' way for them to do so. The various objections to the national curriculum throughout Australia bear witness to this fact; so much so that, in Victoria, both schools and home educators may choose whether to adhere to the National Curriculum or not. This situation is democratic as it allows families real choice in the education of their children

Most home educators do not wish to reproduce the state school system in the home; they wish to choose the type of education most suitable for their individual children. Dr Alan Thomas' research found that approaches to home education varied greatly but that "most families who start out 'doing school' at home find that what works in school does not transfer easily to the home. Of necessity, home educators find themselves pioneering new educational approaches, nearly always less formal ones." The new information pack makes no allowance for this.

Home educators range from very formal to very informal but even the least formal of home educators are committed to their children's education. Thomas found that home education often looked nothing

like schooling but was still highly effective regardless of how formal it was.ⁱ It should be noted that Thomas is an academic, not a home educator nor a home education advocate. Dr John Barratt-Peacock's study found that despite one home educating father's own concerns that his children may not be spending enough time learning; the children were doing 5.17 hours of focussed learning in a day – a rate of learning I am sure the Board of Studies would be happy to find in their own schools.ⁱⁱ

Barratt-Peacock was himself a home educator who went on to write the first Australian PhD on home education and therefore has both practical and academic experience of home education.

The new registration regime renders it likely, that a family providing a highly successful home education that does not comply with the Board of Studies curriculum could be deregistered. Such a situation is at variance with the parents' right to determine the manner of a child's education, exceeds the state's responsibility to ensure education is taking place, and defies what any reasonable person would expect of home education compliance.

2. There is no demonstrated need for change.

We are not aware of any educational deficiency or valid concerns arising under the existing registration requirements and understand the home education community and the Home Education Association have not been notified of any such problems. We suggest that, if no such problems exist, there is no need for change. If concerns or problems do exist, extensive consultation should be conducted with experienced home educators in NSW to address such problems without harming home education. Research has shown that increased regulation of home education does not improve the outcomes. In America, Dr Brian Ray found that whether a state had a high degree of regulation (i.e. curriculum approval, teacher qualifications, testing, home visits) or a state had no regulation of home education, the students scored on average at the 86th percentile. The only likely outcome of the proposed regime is therefore unnecessary expense and work for the Board of Studies and for home

educators. We point out that real standards are set by employers and universities and that home educated students meet and often exceed such standards.

The experience of the Victorian home education regime demonstrates that a light touch regime works well. There have, as far as we are aware, been no cases of concern raised by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority in relation to the current registration regime since its inception and the 2012-2013 Annual Report again lists none.ⁱⁱⁱ Anecdotal evidence indicates an extremely high rate of registration compliance in Victoria while other states with more onerous registration regimes are reported to have quite low registration rates.

3. Home education represents a significant commitment by parents.

This is true both in terms of time and lost income. In addition home educators bear the full cost of educating their children and receive no government funding. Subjecting parents to additional paperwork and planning time does not respect this commitment and, instead, diverts the parents' focus from education to planning and record-keeping.

Every child educated at home saves taxpayers money. It makes sense to support parents' willingness to shoulder the educational responsibility for their own children and to assist them to do so successfully. A regime that makes home education more burdensome or that limits the home educator's ability to choose alternative methods, limits the educational choice of parents; hampers their ability to home educate successfully; and limits the chances of children's individual educational needs being catered for adequately. Ultimately, the state pays more for such a regime – and it pays twice in terms of monitoring the regulations and in terms of paying for the education of those students who failing in school and whose needs could be better met by another educational method. It also increases the chances of children's educational needs remaining unmet – if parents' basically have to reproduce the

system that wasn't working for the child, home education is unlikely to succeed and could result in children not reaching their potential when an alternative approach could have succeeded.

4. The lengthy registration process makes no allowance for the hasty withdrawal of children from school in the event of the child's best interests requiring it.

If a child needs to be withdrawn from a bullying situation, such action is not taken lightly and the parental right to protect children under such circumstances should be supported by the Board of Studies. It would be unreasonable if the parent were to risk truancy fines or the rejection of a home education application when the child's immediate safety depended on their withdrawal from school.

Indeed a three month process for registration is unreasonably long for any home educator. Across the border in Victoria, homeschooling registrations are processed in 14 days.

5. The requirement to set and meet specific learning outcomes is unfair.

While benchmarks are all very well, learning outcomes cannot be predetermined at an individual level as all children are different and learn different things at different rates via different methods. There is no one curriculum which guarantees any given learning outcome.

The state cannot guarantee that any child attending an approved NSW school (whether state or private) will emerge having met the required outcomes. In order to prove that any parent's home education plans were inadequate, the state would need to show that its own curriculum does in fact produce, in its own schools, better results than the parents are likely to get at home conducting the education of their children in the manner they see fit.

There is a minority of students who will never meet the required outcomes. It would be monumentally unfair to deny these children the benefits of learning in a secure home environment and the opportunity to meet their own best level of education simply because they are unable to meet the predetermined outcomes – outcomes they would be equally unable to meet if they attended school.

There are also those students who we regard as “late bloomers” whose opportunity to realise their potential lies in the individual and personalised attention they receive as part of their home education. We feel it is essential not to jeopardize the future of these students by an over-zealous attitude which assumes that failure to meet predetermined outcomes in the early years demonstrates a fault with the educational provision and subsequently leads to home schooling deregistration.

6. Networking is an important aspect of home education and prevents the isolation of families.

Home education is not confined to one place. Families utilise many and varied facilities within the community (e.g. libraries, sporting facilities, parks, museums etc) rather than spending all school hours at home. It is also common practice for home educators to network on a weekly or fortnightly basis and to attend occasional activities, excursions and camps organised by groups of home educators. We are concerned that the requirement that “the educational program upon which a child’s registration is based *must be delivered in the child’s home*” would isolate home educators, discourage networking between them and effectively confine them to their homes. Given the undisputed benefit of social interaction for children in general, and the benefits for home educated children in particular^{iv} this requirement is counter-productive.

7. Parents have a democratically and internationally recognised right to determine the manner in which their children are educated.

This right is upheld by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights which provides that, “Parents have the prior right to determine the form their children’s education.”^v Logically, the

State's right to intervene in the education process is limited to ensuring that the children's right to education is fulfilled. This is reflected in the NSW Education Act 1990 which states, "The education of a child is primarily the responsibility of the child's parents". The requirement for a home educator's program to be based on the Board of Studies syllabuses contradicts this right and responsibility. In addition the Convention on Children's Rights states that education shall be based on "the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential" and, given that not all children are the same, a diversity of approaches is conducive to achieving this.

8. There is no provision for part-time home education

This is an option which should be available for those who wish to use it in accordance with the principle of honouring parental choice. Sometimes partial home education provides just the right balance for children unable to cope with fulltime schooling.

9. The frequency of home visits is unspecified.

Although the information pack indicates that the family would be contacted to arrange a mutually convenient time for home visits, there is concern amongst the community that home educators could be pressured into such meetings at short notice and that 'from time to time' sets no limit on how often such visits could take place.

10. Grade level requirements.

Some students learn at such a pace and in such myriad ways that the requirement to stick to the curriculum or give advance notice of any departures from the registered year level does not reflect the reality of catering for students individually and being able to 'seize the moment' when an interest or opportunity arises or to extend students without prior permission. Sometimes students get through work at an unexpected rate and having to mark time and wait for permission to move on is

counterproductive. Similarly, for struggling students, it is realistic for parents to be able to slow down and ensure students understand material covered rather than keeping pace with the curriculum at the expense of true understanding. Even for highly structured home educators, in some instances, it becomes evident that it would be beneficial to go back and do some foundational work from an earlier level. Again, the approval required for any departure from the specified grade level, renders going ahead a breach of the registration requirements and the waiting for approval wastes valuable time.

Conclusion

In summary, the information pack fails to recognise the diversity of home education practice and is far too restrictive. In essence it is like requiring that families seek permission to cook at home instead of frequenting restaurants and then dictating the menu, the ingredients and the method while insisting on a level of paperwork more appropriate to large-scale food preparation. In addition, pre-approval would be required in order to cook any day's menu on the 'wrong' day. Implementing this attitude in a home education regime does not respect the parents' right to choose and implement the best education for their child.

Homeschooling works and is a more effective and practical approach to education for some children than school. The drastic change represented by this new information pack has been introduced with no apparent reference to home education experts or literature and without any study of the impact it will have on home education. There has been no comprehensive survey of home educators, which we recommend as necessary due to the diverse nature of the home education community.

There is no demonstrated need for these changes. A free society cannot survive without a diversity of ideas. Home education promotes such diversity but requiring home educators to adhere to the new information pack would limit the ability of home educators to provide for the individual learning needs

of their children, forcing them to conform to conventional ideas of schooling and reduce a family's freedom to choose an alternative or more effective course. We therefore recommend that the information pack be revoked. This would allow parents to stay focussed on children's learning and development unhampered by the administrative concerns more appropriate to the running of schools.

Yours sincerely

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ⁱ Thomas, Dr Alan 'Informal learning, home education and homeschooling', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, http://www.infed.org/biblio/home_education.htm Dr Thomas is a visiting fellow at the Institute of Education, University of London. He was formerly at the Northern Territory University, Darwin. He is a fellow of the British Psychological Society.

ⁱⁱ Barratt-Peacock, Dr John: *The How and Why of Australian Home Education*, LaTrobe University 1997.

ⁱⁱⁱ VRQA Annual Report 2012-13 <http://www.vrqa.vic.gov.au/Documents/AnnRport2013.pdf>

^{iv} Basham, Patrick: *Homeschooling: From the Extreme to the Mainstream*, Cato Institute, Canada, 2001
www.fraserinstitute.ca/admin/books/files/homeschool.pdf

^v United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26.3
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/UDHR/Pages/Language.aspx?LangID=eng>