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The Home Education Association Queensland Subcommittee (HEAQ) would like to bring to attention the social isolation that has occurred for Queensland home educated families due to the restrictions prompted by Covid-19.

Whilst we understand the place of lockdowns and other restrictions, home educated families have been forgotten in the consideration that has been given to the social and educational needs of other school-aged students. It is possible that the needs of home educated students were not considered by the Government based on common misconceptions that home educated students would not be impacted by lockdowns as they rarely leave the house anyway. This is certainly not true – home educated students gather together for group learning opportunities across the curriculum and for social and emotional development. Home educated students have been, and continue to be, significantly impacted by the Covid restrictions. These impacts are amplified by the failure of the Government to consider the needs of this group of students.

2020

In 2020, when early lockdowns were in place, school students were permitted to return to schools as soon as possible, before many other restrictions were lifted. There they were able to gather in large groups and have lunch hours and the camaraderie of the classroom situation to socialise. Such was not the case for home educated students.

Home Educators who come together for group learning activities do not operate as a business, nor are they a registered or recognised community group, and so did not fit into any of the developed 'Covid-Safe Industry Plans'; nor were they eligible to conduct 'Covid-Safe Events'. Thus, they were bound by whatever the current 'private, social gathering' limits were for the day.

The following are examples of activities that were cancelled because home educated students were considered to be 'households' rather than students under the Covid restrictions:

- Regular group learning activities in KLA's across the curriculum, including, but not limited to:
 - History
 - Science
 - Art
 - Performing arts
 - Sport
- Athletics carnivals
- Drama performances
- Camps
- Book week activities
- Swimming carnivals
- Social get togethers in parks

Families rely on these kinds of activities, not only for educational opportunities to achieve the Education Act's requirement of a "high-quality education" but also for much-needed social connection. We have heard accounts such as the children of one family struggling to grasp why they could hear students playing on the oval at the school within earshot of their house, but their home education group was not permitted to run its annual sports carnival. When restrictions were at their tightest, even small groups of 3-4 families could not meet for their weekly craft time or science class because the numbers would have exceeded the limit of 10 in a household. Groups were compelled to fragment, meaning some children missed out on seeing their closest friends, or to not meet at all, resulting in no social contact beyond the immediate family. Meanwhile, their schooled peers were able to freely mingle at school.

2021

As indicated above, home educating families make good use of the resources in the wider community for educational and social purposes. Church and community halls are hired for group learning activities, parks are utilised for play times with other families, community sport and arts groups are attended for development and socialisation.

Again, in 2021, no consideration has been given to the needs of home educated students. As recently as this month, schools were permitted to re-open following the lockdown across multiple LGAs following locally-acquired cases of the Delta variant. However, with gathering limits of 10 and no community sport permitted, regular events such as park plays, sports and choirs have not been possible for many home educating families. Some home educated students have had no opportunities for engagement with others beyond their immediate family.

Conclusion

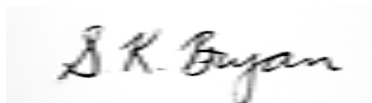
We understand that this inquiry is not directly responsible for the neglect of home educated students when the Queensland Government has considered how to minimise the social and emotional impact of Covid 19 on students. The Federal Education Minister has advised us that such considerations and decisions were the responsibility of each State or Territory Education Minister. However, the Minister for Education not only failed to consult home educators, she declined to meet with the HEA for almost 12 months during 2019-2020. When a meeting was eventually given, the Minister was adamant that no allowances for home educated students were needed. Home educators are the only student body not represented in the Covid planning meetings between health and education. Likewise, the health department declined an application for an exemption to the movement and gathering orders for home educated students, similar to the exemption which has been provided for all other primary and secondary students in Queensland.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring to your attention the heightened social isolation and subsequent impact on emotional health that home educated families have experienced in comparison to their schooled peers. We believe that this is a matter of injustice, albeit most likely caused by ignorance rather than intention. We hope that bringing it to your attention now might result in due consideration being given to home educating families as restrictions

are managed in light of the ongoing Covid crisis. The Home Education Association, as Australia's peak body for home educators, stands ready to assist governments in formulating thoughtful, just, safe plans that give consideration to home educated students, as well as their schooled peers.



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