

Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

Submission No: 280
Submitted by: [REDACTED]
Publication: Making the submission and your name public
Attachments: No attachment

Submitter Comments:

As a teacher and former home educator, I have concerns with several of the proposed amendments to legislation regarding home education. First, the requirement for home educators to follow the Australian Curriculum, which fails to consider the diverse learning styles, interests, strengths and challenges of children. Many people who choose to homeschool do so because the requirements of the Australian Curriculum did not suit their child or meet their needs and have found their child to have thrived outside of the constraints of the curriculum with the freedom to learn in their own way by following their own interests. Following the Australian Curriculum assumes that having every child knowing the same things at the same time is a desirable outcome. This cookie-cutter approach serves no-one, particularly not students who are working ahead of or behind the level they are “supposed to be at”, or those with disabilities which make accessing the curriculum difficult or impossible. As a society, why do we seem bent on making everyone the same, when clearly society is much better served – as is the wellbeing of each individual – by being made up of people with a wide range of diverse skills and abilities? My own daughter thrived when allowed the freedom to follow her interests, taking advantage of opportunities not afforded in the Australian Curriculum, including studying online university courses in Forensic Science and Chemistry at the age of 14, learning how to render suet to tallow to make soap and teaching herself hands-on skills such as sewing, knitting and special effects make-up to name a few. She also greatly benefitted from the opportunity to explore her identity as an autistic young woman and build a strong self-esteem free from the constraints and dictates of a curriculum which did not suit her needs. My work in schools has allowed me to witness the negative effects of strict adherence to an inflexible curriculum. Many children are left feeling like failures because they don’t meet the arbitrary standards for their age. This leads to mental health and behavioural issues and is one of the many reasons families leave the school system and choose to homeschool. Children grow and develop at different rates, and as individuals they have strengths and challenges in different areas. Homeschooling allows parents to nurture their child’s strengths while providing targeted support for their challenges along with time and space to develop at their own rate. This improves children’s self-esteem, confidence and mental health. The requirement to stick to the Australian Curriculum would severely hamper this. Another very concerning amendment is the proposed requirement to show that homeschooling is in “the best interests of the child”. Who determines their best interest and based on what criteria? Parents are best placed to know their child’s needs and having to attempt to prove this to strangers who will most likely not understand homeschooling philosophy, practices and benefits is a concerning and unnecessary burden, and a gross overreach of government authority. Homeschooling families already provide extensive evidence to the Home Education Unit that they are providing a high-quality education. My concern with this proposed amendment is that it will be a mechanism for removing homeschooling as an option families can choose, instead requiring “permission” to be sought from an as-yet-unknown body. This is a violation of our freedom of choice.

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Dear Committee, I would like to offer my feedback to the proposed legislation based on my experiences both as a homeschooling parent and a registered, practicing teacher in the state system implementing the Australian Curriculum in classrooms. I have serious concerns with the proposed requirement of home educators to follow the Australian Curriculum and would strongly refute Ms Farmer's claim that it will "reduce gaps in learning" when students are transitioning from homeschooling to mainstream school. My daughter's experience of homeschooling highlights this.

I started home educating my youngest child when she was 13, about to start to grade 8. She had attended state schools up to this point and achieved excellent academic results, but in the previous 2 years I had noticed a steady decline in her mental health. This is what led to the decision to home educate. We started using the Australian Curriculum as the basis for her educational plan, but after 2 months she communicated that she needed a break from curriculum work. With her greatly increased time at home, I had observed many traits of autism in my daughter which she had been working very hard to mask while she was at school, so we went down the path of seeking, and obtaining, diagnosis. This break in curriculum work afforded her the time and mental space without pressure to explore her identity as a young autistic woman, and to learn how she functions and learns best while undertaking activities which provided diverse learning opportunities as well as "soul building", mental wellbeing and self-care. We grew together a great deal in the 2 years she was home educating, and she is now a very strong, self-aware, resilient young woman. She has also learned an incredible amount about topics and subjects that are not on the Australian Curriculum. One example resulted from following her interest in "Hamilton the Musical", which led her to a deep dive into American history at the time of federation and since. Through this exploration she has gained great understanding of complex concepts including; international relationships, through exploring the ongoing effect of events of the time on American-French relations; economic systems, through exploring Hamilton's influence on developing America's economic system and its basis on the British system; social issues such as slavery and their effect on societies and economies; political ideologies and systems, and much more. She would not have had the opportunity to develop this deep and broad historical and social understanding if she was tied to meeting the outcomes of a pre-determined curriculum. Following her deep interest in science, she undertook many self-led hands-on science explorations and projects (for example rendering suet to tallow to make soap, dissecting multiple animal organs) as well as completing online university-level courses in Chemistry and Forensic Science. These are also opportunities not afforded through the Australian Curriculum. My daughter has since decided to return to school, starting grade 10 this year. Despite having done virtually no Australian Curriculum work in 2 years, her first term results so far are excellent, achieving As in History, Science, English and Extension Maths (results pending for other subjects). She also chose an advanced Maths elective class, which she is excelling in. Her friends frequently come to her for help. She displays absolutely no "gaps in learning" from not having followed the Australian Curriculum – in fact her learning has been deeper and more whole from being afforded the opportunity to learn in ways meaningful to her about topics that interest her. I would contrast this with the many, many students I see in school who are taught using the Australian Curriculum and yet have major gaps in learning. I see high-school students with year 3-4 level literacy and numeracy skills. Upper primary students who cannot read beyond simple 3 or 4 letter words and can't construct a coherent sentence. Clearly use of the Australian Curriculum does not work for every child and forcing it onto those who have already experienced that it doesn't work for them will

only hinder learning and have major impacts on motivation and mental health. Furthermore, Ms Farmer is using the tragic case of the suicide of a child who happened to be home educating at the time as a justification for imposing greater restrictions on home educators without giving any context to that particular case: was the student home educating as a result of school-induced trauma or issues in other areas of their life? Was it the last attempt to save this struggling, suffering child? We don't know. My own daughter, after nearly 2 years of home education using a self-directed learning plan, said to me that if she had stayed in school she would be dead by now. Read that again: HAD SHE BEEN FORCED TO STAY IN THAT SYSTEM, WITH THE PRESSURES OF MEETING THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM, SHE WOULD HAVE TAKEN HER OWN LIFE. Having witnessed her struggles, and those of her older sister who is also autistic, I do not take this statement lightly. Her mental health was badly damaged under a system that dictated what she should learn and when, that told her that her passions were unimportant, thereby devaluing the essence of who she is. Ms Farmer cannot claim that home education caused this tragic suicide when we are hearing from children who leave school to preserve their own mental health that school itself, and the system that forces children to meet standardised, arbitrary measures of "success" or be deemed a failure, is identified by kids themselves as a major contributing factor to severely declining mental health. With the increased self-awareness, self-esteem and inner strength she has gained from having the time and space to focus on what she needed, my daughter has re-entered the school system, safe in the knowledge that she can return home anytime and implement her alternative pathway to university (TAFE and/or Open University subjects) in order to reach her goal of studying medicine. Children are not robots. They are not empty vessels into which we can pour the knowledge deemed necessary for the outcomes chosen by faceless others for them. They are complex, unique, beautiful humans with individual personalities, interests, strengths, challenges and NEEDS. When we ignore these needs in pursuit of an arbitrarily-designed, externally enforced standard of uniformity, we force them to push aside or suppress that which makes them uniquely them, causing untold damage to their sense of identity, self-esteem, life achievements and mental health. Forcing a standardised curriculum, which over 80% of home educating students already choose not to use (despite already having free access to it), on a population of children, many of whom home educate to avoid having to follow a restrictive curriculum, will have severe detrimental effects on academic outcomes and, even worse, on the mental health and wellbeing of our beautiful children.