

Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Introduction:

This submission is written in the hope that it can function as a **complement** to the **submission by Dr Rebecca English**, which she made public. (Note that there has been no collusion with Dr English supporting what follows.) Given her report is a thorough piece of academic research and argument, I wish only to elaborate on her comment that *parents who choose home education are responding for what is perceived to be schools' failure* (English, 2024, p.3). A less academic register will be used in this elaboration as I wish to present my classroom teacher's perspective to the committee. My credibility in providing this submission is based on (a) formal qualifications and doctorate research into teacher learning within curriculum reform (b) 53 years as an educator in public and private schools, including experience in primary, secondary and tertiary classrooms (c) leadership/management positions at department and school level and (d) personal and current experience in homeschooling.

After many years as an educator, I see no reason to change my view that **learning** is the principal concern of schools P-12. There are other outcomes from schooling, including socialisation, child care, career pathways, but learning that enables **thinking** and development of knowledge should be the focus of schooling. **Understandably**, an Australian Curriculum is in place for P-10 students, intended to ensure that learning is formalised in a framework of objectives, cognitive processes and standards. These are articulated in syllabuses designed to be guidelines for qualified educators so that curriculum is **delivered** in a broadly consistent fashion. Pedagogical frameworks supporting delivery vary from school to school. What the bill in question proposes is that this form of curriculum can be delivered in a homeschooling context, where parents are not, necessarily, qualified teachers.

Again, it is **understandable** that a government might wish to **control what learning should look like** in this state, when increasing numbers of parents are committing to homeschooling their children. Incidentally, perhaps the unthinking bystander sees homeschooling as just a "cop-out". Homeschooling is not easy: it is not, necessarily, the parent/adult's career choice and it **does not pay well**. It can strain relationships as well as improve depth of relationships. ***When I was teaching my homeschooled grandchild I went into teacher mode, and "grandma" disappeared. That was not necessarily a good thing. Sometimes we clashed; sometimes we hit creative highs, but there was evidence of progress and of learning how to learn, which formal schooling had failed to provide.***

The critical point here is that the current trend indicates that all children are not learning in the school classrooms, the corollary being that the curriculum and the mode of delivery by qualified teachers simply **might not be working for all children**. Diversity, numbers, lack of staff, reporting – all these are issues that contribute to failure, but most of all it needs to be acknowledged that modification of the curriculum to address every individual's learning difficulty or disability has not been possible under current conditions, especially poorly resourced classrooms. Evidence of this lies in fact that 61% of homeschooled children have a disability or health issue.

Teachers attempting to deliver this curriculum in classrooms characterised by a wide diversity of learner capability and behaviours are leaving the profession. It is most concerning that there is a high rate of early career teachers in this group who wisely choose to find satisfaction elsewhere. Most recently, my experience as a leading teacher in the public system, enabling on-site teacher learning focussed on classroom research, included planning and operating an intensive program for early career teachers. My goal was to keep these teachers in the profession. Thus my personal knowledge of my subject at the grassroots underpins my elaboration of school failure. So... I would ask one of those 'silly questions' people who are not in government ask: **Even if homeschooling, with its increasing statistics, merits an authority capable of implementing strong guidelines, supervision and accountability, why would it be a smart move to solve the trend of homeschooling by mandating this same Australian curriculum be delivered by homeschooling parents?** Why, if there is a problem, is there not reason to examine the government authority in question. Some deeper reflection might not go astray.

Making homeschooling the distraction from schools' failure is not a long term smart political move, even though the bill garners media attention. Unfortunately, the bill may increase the opportunists wishing to lend a helping hand to homeschooling parents meet the proposed mandates. For example, EUKA, the *largest online full-time education provider in Australia*, promises to meet the requirements of the Australian curriculum - for a fee, of course. Hence, homeschoolers could attend lectures or Zoom session and complete worksheets based on the Australian curriculum, overseen by a non-government body. Is the government outsourcing responsibility for homeschooling to such organizations, providing the Australian curriculum is utilised? Again, there is no guarantee that the needs of the 61% of homeschooled children with disabilities are being met. Unfortunately, parents may accept this alternative, because **at least** children's behavioural issues – those that caused school refusal, anxiety, suspension, demand avoidance, e.g.) are less likely to occur given one-on-one supervision by a familiar, caring parent.

It **could be** that such a virtual classroom works a little more efficiently than a classroom, because first, the critical component would be the parent who provides **one-on-one support**; second, the distraction of peers is eliminated; and third, compliance with completion of worksheets may simulate learning. **Evidence of the success** of such online curriculum delivery is not necessarily well-researched at this point, in my opinion. Sadly, for the government, this emerging approach to homeschooling **may only increase the numbers** exiting the 'real' school classroom.

The problem that merits attention is what is happening in classrooms and why teachers are struggling to actually teach, thereby causing the exit of some students who look elsewhere for quality education that is the responsibility of a diligent government, not one to be outsourced. Our dismal performance in comparison to international schools (PISA testing) further supports the urgency to address classroom issues.

Just maybe it is time to change, to deal with the serious problem of classroom learning, *to smell the cheese so you know that it's getting old* as Dr Spencer Johnson suggested in his famous text, *Who moved my cheese?* Despite my years of devotion to set curricula, I now query the relevance of traditional approaches and compliance to syllabus documents. A student suggested to me recently that *You Tube can teach me more than the school can teach me*. This was before ChatGPT and AI were on the scene.

I submit that **this bill is a waste of time, money and effort** that could be spent on remedies to the school classroom problems by:

- (a) rethinking syllabus demands, reducing the academic overkill of syllabuses and influence of ideologies.
- (b) investigating why some teachers choose to homeschool their own children
- (c) focussing only on standards, if finally this mandate is put in place.
- (d) acknowledging change by addressing challenges in online access.
- (e) enabling **spaces and places** for classroom teachers to **collaborate** with special needs teachers and counsellors.
- (f) providing **sufficient support staff** to work with special needs students and those with behavioural issues in **every class every day of the week**.

(Unfortunately the first listed point is 'not easy' and a long term remedy. The last will cost a lot of money.)

If political gain, along with deliberate distraction, were not intended here, I would ask **why the committee is not collaborating with those who do have some evidence-based knowledge relevant to the education of homeschooled children**. Some aspects of the bill are almost ludicrous in the level of ignorance reflected, particularly those aspects relevant to senior schooling. Similarly, there is a level of ignorance about homeschooling, not necessary given the research and expertise Dr Rebecca English could provide to the committee.