

Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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24th March 2024,

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to you as a mother of two neurodivergent children. I myself am Autistic and have ADHD. We are a secular homeschooling family who vaccinate our children, believe in science and **do not** believe in conspiracy theories of “government control over our children”.

I am an Early Childhood Specialist. I have worked in the field of education since 2009. I am a registered Queensland primary school teacher, qualified Music teacher, qualified Montessori teacher and a registered homeschooler in Queensland. Two of my Autistic special interests are education and neurodivergence. These interests bring immense joy and fulfilment to my life.

One of the reasons we chose to homeschool our children, (the one that relates to this question of curriculum), is because Autistic people and people with ADHD have an *interest based nervous system*. Their nervous system is built on a totally different structure to neurotypical people who have an *importance based nervous system* (Dodson, W. 2024).

Trying to push children with *interest based nervous systems* to follow and excel at a set curriculum that is not personally meaningful to them, is detrimental to their personal and academic development. Requiring homeschooling families with neurodivergent children, (particularly Autistic children and children with ADHD) to strictly follow the content descriptions and topics within the Australian curriculum would disadvantage and discriminate against those children and negatively impact their learning experiences and educational outcomes. Homeschoolers need to honour their children’s neurotype and work towards the *Achievement Standards* of the Australian curriculum by following their children’s interests. We can *co-create* engaging, motivating learning experiences *with* our neurodivergent children to ensure they are able to connect with their learning and create deep understandings.

Children with interest based nervous systems have brains that release dopamine (responsible for focus), only under specific conditions, these being: a novel situation, a personally interesting situation, a challenging situation and when they feel a sense of extreme urgency (Dodson, W. 2024). When Autistic children and those children with ADHD are *interested*, their learning is *able to progress*. We must recognise and work with how our children’s brains are wired to give them the best opportunities for academic, social and emotional growth (Dodson, W. 2024).

Autistic children and those with ADHD are happier, self-motivated, engaged, can concentrate fully and can achieve academic success when they are able to follow their *special interests* (Winter-Messiers et al, 2007, Wood, R. 2021). We knew that to engage our neurodivergent children meaningfully in their learning journey and to help them succeed, we would need to embrace their particular interests and *use these as a foundation and springboard for introducing broader subjects and skills*.

I recognised throughout my teaching career in Queensland state schools that many children disengaged with the set curriculum because it wasn't meaningful to them. Particularly children with ADHD and Autistic children. Bright, intelligent students I taught in prep and year one classrooms in Queensland, frequently told me that they were "stupid", "naughty", "bad at writing", "bad at spelling", "dumb" and were scared to try.

Ongoing negative experiences with learning in which neurodivergent children can not fully engage in content and struggle to initiate and complete tasks, creates these negative self-beliefs. Continually asking Autistic children and those with ADHD to work on content that is not meaningful to them leads to negative self-perception and negative relationships with learning because they continuously struggle to engage with and finish pre-determined curriculum tasks. As a result, neurodivergent children are left behind and begin to feel "*different*" and "*less than*" almost immediately upon entering the school system. It was heartbreaking. It is *still* heartbreaking.

We are failing these children. They are not reaching their full potential. They were already giving up, in prep. They were developing a poor self-esteem. We were trying to teach them academic "skills" and knowledge in a dry, disconnected way that they literally couldn't connect to, make meaning from or remember and synthesise because of their unique neurological wiring.

My partner and I want to avoid that for our children at all costs. We want our children to love learning and feel empowered by learning. We want them to achieve academic success and *also* maintain their emotional well-being, positive self-esteem and develop a positive Autistic and neurodivergent identity.

Requiring parents to give structured, pre-determined lessons within their home environment would create tension and an ineffective and fractious environment for learning, which is exactly what many parents who choose to homeschool are trying to avoid in the first place. I would literally have to force my Autistic and ADHD children to "learn" information they were not interested in. It would become a situation where they became disenfranchised and resented learning and their loss of agency. They would

resent me as well. It would also be a pointless exercise as this is not the way their brains absorb and retain information.

Rather than trying to force our neurodivergent students to engage in a set of pre-determined “content descriptors” in a homeschool setting, we need to look instead at the “*Achievement Standards*” ACARA describes for each year level and allow home educators to “work towards these achievement standards” in their own way, at their own pace, developing and tailoring *unique and personalised content* that will make the journey towards these standards meaningful, joyful and empowering for their children. This is key to providing a rich and valuable education to neurodivergent children in the homeschool setting.

I have experienced this style of adjustment and accommodation working first hand when I worked as the Acting Head of Special Education at a Toowoomba State School. We worked with students who had a diagnosed disability or developmental delay, as well as with students who were undiagnosed and/or struggling to achieve the stated curriculum benchmarks.

We discovered that the most effective way to help these students to engage academically was to introduce *interest based learning* practices. We were able to help these children progress because they began to enjoy “finding things out” about their favourite topics. When the content was relevant and specific to each child’s interests they became eager to engage with each learning experience. The children began to value the lessons in which they could follow their interests. Students began to ask me when they could see me again because they said their lessons with me “were fun”. Without coercion or bribery, (common in behaviourist methods used in classrooms today), these children who had been so disengaged by the standardised curriculum became engaged, self-motivated and curious again when they could learn *through* their interests. They were able to pick up key academic skills (that were the goal of the set curriculum) when we abandoned the standardised content and worked towards academic goals through the lens of their personal interests instead.

I recall a neurodivergent student in year four who was falling behind in all areas of academic work. They loved rugby league, and it was only through chatting about “The Cowboys”, looking at rugby league magazines, team lists, scores, statistics, etc. that we were able to engage this student and they began to learn the academic skills they required (through the prism of their special interest).

As a neurodivergent homeschooling family, we are not advocating for complete autonomy from the mainstream curriculum or department oversight. We are stating the need for a nuanced approach toward, and

understanding of, individual students needs and the flexibility to develop content reflective of our children's special interests, instead of following prescribed content descriptions: including prescribed books, authors and topics. We can more effectively reach the ACARA "achievement standards" when we are able to work *in partnership* with our Autistic children and children with ADHD.

Autistic people engage with and make sense of the world *through their interests*. As educators we can support our neurodivergent children's learning by observing, following and enriching these interests. This "neuro-affirming" framework for teaching neurodivergent students leaves them with a sense of autonomy and self-motivation intact. It also improves educational outcomes and student wellbeing (Winter-Messiers et al, (2007), Abbene, Barajas, Goldman (2024), Goldman, (2004).

In practice, this looks like developing *thematic based learning units* inspired by our children's special interests. As parents and carers, we help our children access relevant and diverse real world experiences that enhance their understandings through interactive, didactic exploration. This approach considers their unique developmental and learning needs and focuses on longer term educational priorities. When we support our Autistic children's strengths and interests we foster their self-confidence and improve their engagement in learning. This is what our family are currently doing and our two neurodivergent children are flourishing. They are happy, engaged, learning, maintaining their sense of curiosity and autonomy and are able to synthesis information from all curriculum areas through the lens of their interests. Many parents choose to homeschool their children because they can see the *need* for their child to undertake this style of *interest based, explorative, thematic learning*.

In accordance with the QCAA guidelines for adjustments for students with disabilities, *personalising curriculum*, (whilst working towards ACARA achievement standards) for Autistic students and students with ADHD is a "**reasonable adjustment**".

Personalising the content for these children fulfils the following criteria for "reasonable adjustment" (providing access to learning, increasing participation and engagement and capturing an accurate representation of the students learning).

- Provide access to learning: By working with the special interests of Autistic children and children with ADHD we can ensure we give them the opportunity to convey their strengths to us, hear and validate their authentic voices and give them the educational framework their brains

require to express their thoughts clearly and reach their full capabilities (Winter-Messiers, et al, 2007)

- Increase participation and engagement: Designing learning experiences based upon special interests improves wellbeing and academic engagement for Autistic children (Wood, R. 2021).
- Capturing an accurate representation of the students learning: Autistic students and students with ADHD will often “deep - dive” into topics of interest and this super-power of hyper focus is an excellent opportunity for them to develop a diverse range of academic skills across various subjects in a joyful and meaningful way. Autistic and ADHD students are more capable of expressing their understandings through the lens of their special interests (Wood, R. 2021).

We must preserve the flexibility that home education offers our neurodivergent children. We must allow them the agency to be authentic and learn in a way that matches their unique Autistic and ADHD “brain wiring”. We must enable parents to work with their children’s unique interests and ways of learning to ensure that these amazing young people get the most out of their education and fulfil their incredible potential.

Simply requiring parents to teach the same curriculum at home as is being taught at schools defeats the purpose of homeschooling as it fails to recognise the different way of learning that parents are seeking for their children. Trying to standardise homeschooling curriculum can only lead to the same poor academic and social-emotional outcomes for our homeschooled neurodivergent children that we are witnessing in the state school system right now.

Finally, I speak from a place of personal experience with school harm. I went through school as an undiagnosed Autistic female with ADHD. I excelled in the subjects that were of interest to me yet I could never achieve the same results in other areas, no matter how hard I tried. As a result, I had an extremely “spikey” report card profile. This contributed to acute anxiety and depression at the time and that I am still suffering from today.

When I was able to expressly follow my interests after school, I excelled. I completed a Bachelor of Music, a Graduate Diploma in Education and a Montessori Diploma of Early Childhood Education. I absorbed and retained the information effortlessly because education is one of my special interests. I finally felt competent, intelligent and excited about learning. *The confidence I have developed by learning in my “Autistic way” has given me the sense of agency to try new and challenging things.* Learning through my special

interests is not a limiting way of learning - it is *THE WAY I LEARN*. It empowers me.

Our special interests are how Autistic people and people with ADHD connect to the world and create meaning between various contexts, subjects and experiences. When we follow our interests we experience deep states of flow and absorb information effortlessly.

Through homeschooling, we have an excellent opportunity to allow our Autistic students and students with ADHD the right to learn in their own way; following their interests and strengths and using these as a foundation to inspire broader discoveries and develop skills that will improve their lives.

Our brains are *wired differently* and therefore we require a *different* structure, a personalised structure to our education - one based on our unique interests.

Instead of trying to change or suppress our neurodivergent children's special interests, we need to *embrace* and work *with* them. As homeschooling parents, we are aware of our children's different interests as they change and expand. We are able to interweave so much valuable learning across a wide variety of subjects by exploring our children's current interests *with* them and in a way that engages and benefits them both academically and emotionally. Following our children's interests and working towards broad achievement standards ensures our Autistic children and children with ADHD will retain their motivation for learning as well as develop strong, positive neurodivergent identities.

It is time to allow for beneficial change. It is time to listen to Autistic adults who have experienced school harm as I have and recognise that our neurodivergent children *learn differently* and that they deserve the choice and flexibility to do so in homeschool settings.

Thank you for reading this.

I am interested in talking with you should you wish to discuss my submission further.

Kind Regards,

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BMus, Grad Dip Ed, Dip Montessori (Early Childhood).

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