

Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

Submission No: 1362
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Submitter Comments:

Dear Committee members,

I am writing to you because of my concerns about the proposed changes to legislation which will affect Home Educators in Queensland.

I have an 8 year old son who I am about to enrol under the Home Education Unit through QLD Education. He is a Grade 3 boy who has Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 2 with a Pathological Demand Avoidance profile, ADHD, and severe anxiety.

The new Bill "Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024" has several concerning changes to Home Education requirements which would affect families like mine where our child is struggling in mainstream school.

The main areas I am concerned about are:

- being required to follow the Australian Curriculum.
- Removing the provisional registration period of up to 60 days.
- Increased reporting, including proving academic progress.
- Requiring parents to prove that Home Education is in the best interests of the child.

Requirement to follow the Australian Curriculum

I have been considering Home Education as an option since the end of last year. Reading the current requirements, I began to feel hopeful there was a way to respond to my child's particular needs and give him a positive, productive and *engaged* education experience.

I am dismayed to see the proposed changes to Home Education in QLD namely requiring using the national curriculum, a change from the previous criteria that had been established in the Education (General Provisions) Act 2006 which requires parents to create an education program which:

"is responsive to the changing needs of the child as indicated by the short and long term educational and personal goals.

has regard to the age, ability, aptitude and development of the child concerned.

is conducted in an environment conducive to learning.

is responsive to the child's need for social development.

utilises suitable and relevant teaching strategies to deliver the educational program to the child.

engages the child in a range of rich and varied learning experiences.

is supported by sufficient and appropriate resources.

uses strategies for monitoring educational progress."

This is our fourth year in the State School system. While my son is considered cognitively gifted in some areas, he has slow information processing speeds in others. He has found being at school overwhelming because of his sensory sensitivities, (for example he must always wear ear defenders at school) but contributing to the overwhelm is that the Australian Curriculum is stuffed to bursting point with so many subject areas.

On top of this, my son has the Pathological Demand Avoidance profile (otherwise known as Pervasive Desire for Autonomy) of Autism which means things that are perceived as a demand, whether they seem small or simple for others, can cause such children to go in to fight/flight or freeze response. I believe the overload from being pushed through the curriculum has contributed to issues he has had managing mainstream school.

While we have had access to Student Support teachers, their job is to push him through the curriculum too. (I must also add at his school, such teachers have a significant workload with a lot of kids to support. There is not enough of them and this year some of these teachers have had to become classroom teachers due to staff shortages.)

I have worked extensively with the school, our Occupational Therapist and our Psychologist to try to get him engaged and feeling safe enough to relax in the school environment but by the end of last year, he was closed down, and had been experiencing school anxiety to the

extent that I was not able to get him to leave the house most of the time. His confidence was low, and he was saying terrible things about himself.

We implemented a short-term, part-time attendance plan with his school, but by the end of the year his report card showed “support required” or “developing” for most subject areas. This is a contrast to the fact that my little guy started his prep year well ahead of his peers, being already able to read, count to numbers in the thousands and was already solving maths problems that kids in year 2 and above would be doing.

We have tried again this first term of 2024, hoping that a change of teacher, and having a friend in the class would help, but it is not working out and of course the expected workload of primary school only increases year by year under the Australian curriculum. My son is experiencing severe school anxiety and has missed so many days this term. Our family is burnt out with the stress and we have finally concluded that mainstream school is not suitable for my son at this time.

My son has a natural drive for learning. For instance, he is interested in and researches advanced maths concepts, however his learning is asynchronistic in other areas. He needs to have more tailored program with less overall subject areas for him to be able to succeed. I am concerned that being forced to follow the ACARA will be limiting in some areas where he is advanced but too much of an overload in others. His style of learning needs time to immerse in a concept and investigate it. Not being rushed through the 8 areas of the National Curriculum, leaving him burnt out and unengaged. I want to foster a love for learning that will continue into adulthood and beyond, and I feel that Home Education requirements ***as they are***, give the best chance of that.

I'm sure that you will hear from other submissions what amazing things that Home Educated kids are doing. Even doing University Subjects from early teen years! This is something I can see my own son doing as he already has advanced mathematic skills for his year level. It would be a travesty for him and other children like him to be bound to the Australian Curriculum.

Changes to Provisional Registration:

When speaking about this, I would like to introduce you to the concept of the “Reluctant Home schooler”. I have recently started to be involved in Home Education Groups. I’m also involved in the “School Can’t Australia (Parent/Carer Peer Support)” Group on Facebook and there are so many parents in these groups who like me did their best to try and get their children to stay in the mainstream school environment. We work with our schools, do all we can, then realise for our children’s wellbeing, we have to bring them home for Distance Education or Home Education. Such people are not choosing Home Education because of religion, or personal philosophy or anti-government sentiment. This is not something we were planning on when we started our kids’ school journey. This is a situation we never saw ourselves in, hence the term “Reluctant Home Schooler”.

As discussed earlier in my submission, we had a terrible time with school refusal last year. In the “School Can’t Australia” group we prefer to call it “school can’t” because it’s not related to truancy. It isn’t a case of children wagging school, going off to get up to mischief with mates, it’s kids who mentally cannot even bring themselves to leave the house in some cases. Some children develop mental health problems, are bullied or so burnt out that they cannot even get themselves to go (this is often autistic children, like mine).

When parents or carers get to the point where things are so serious that they must look at other options to save their children, having the provisional registration period gives them time to produce the Home Education plan.

Please know that many times, the decision to remove a child from school comes as a “last straw” situation. Many times, it is due to a crisis. The parents or carers need that time to decompress with their child safely at home and come up with the plan. Parents of “school refusers” have already had a long time of advocating for the child, meetings with schools, implementing plans that don’t work, having to miss days at work, cut down or even quit work. By this time, everyone in the family has had their mental health impacted. In my own situation, by the end of last year I was suffering severe anxiety and depression around trying to get my son to go to school and be okay at school, while still trying to earn a living. I was at breaking point.

I implore you, please don't remove a provisional registration period. If parents/carers have to come up with a plan while still being expected to force their child to go to school to avoid truancy issues, this is deeply harmful for the whole family. I am talking mentally for everyone in the family and also physically for those children who are in danger of self-harming or being assaulted or bullied at school. We are already pushed to our limits, and some will desperately need this time.

Increased reporting, including proving academic progress

Part of the new legislation in my understanding, would be increased reporting, including proving academic progress. It has come to my attention, through interactions with people who teach in the QLD system, that there is no requirement for teachers to 'prove' academic progress. Why should we as home educating parents/carers be required to provide more proof than would be required by a teacher in a school? Also, I would debate that all children in mainstream school make progress in all subject areas every year. Children progress at different speeds.

Home Educators are already required under the current legislation to submit yearly plans and provide a yearly report to back up what they are doing. I fear also that increasing the reporting requirements and narrowing the curriculum that Home Educators can use is likely to drive some Home Schoolers underground.

Home educators already make huge sacrifices to teach their children at home, for example time and potentially their ability to earn a living or progress in their careers. We are already stretched, please don't make it even more difficult. I feel by taking our struggling kids out of mainstream school, we are taking the strain off an already stretched education system, please help us succeed.

In addition, in practical terms the increased reporting means increased strain on the HEU. There will not be enough staff to handle all these new requirements, and I am led to believe there has been no proposal to increase the budget for the HEU to accommodate these changes.

Requiring parents to prove that Home Education is in the best interests of the child

The part of the proposed legislation requiring parents to prove that Home Education is in the best interests of the child is deeply concerning and not well defined. How does one “prove” this, and who would we be proving this to? Who defines what the “best interests” are?

I have advocated for my child since day one and worked to understand my child. I have pursued diagnoses when I could see there were areas that he struggled with that weren’t “typical” and researched, read books and sought professional help to find all the best ways we can support him. I am a sensible, moderate person and I truly believe that I know the best interests of my child more than a bystander or bureaucrat ever could.

Conclusion

I hope you will consider the many submissions you receive and see that parts of this legislation cannot be passed as is. I believe the changes discussed above could be actively harmful for Home Educated children for the reasons I have elaborated above. Thank you, Committee Members, so much, for reading and considering my submission.