

Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Submission

EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2024

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to share my strong opposition to several amendments to the Queensland Education Bill, particularly those that will have a negative impact on home education families. My position is drawn from my experience as a parent of teenagers (one of whom is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder Level 3, with combined Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Pathological Demand Avoidance) and as an experienced, qualified primary school teacher.

Our background

To help your understanding of my perspective on the proposed amendments, I would like to share some key experiences from my family's involvement in traditional, specialist and home education.

My second child exhibited developmental and behavioural differences in the first few years (sleep issues, fixations, motor skills difficulties, speech and communication challenges, social difficulties). Despite seeking help from public paediatricians, concerns were dismissed and attributed to parenting and a speech disorder. This delayed access to crucial early intervention programs and medical support that would have improved his educational and developmental outcomes.

Attending Kindy presented with some challenges, but due to 1 to 1 support provided, a flexible learning program of 5 days per fortnight and an exceptional learning environment that suited his needs, it was a successful year compared to the years that followed. Unable to attend childcare due to severe separation anxiety when trialled meant that he could not attend. From prep to early year 4, he struggled in the classroom, rarely participated in traditional curriculum-based learning, and faced multiple suspensions for non-compliance. He spent most of his time reading and eating alone in the classroom, receiving no support, understanding, or effective accommodations. School absences were frequent due to exhaustion and refusal. His anxiety and depression became severe, leading to auditory hallucinations. One instance involved him asking if a stranger had called him names, highlighting his severe lack of confidence at 5 years of age. Prioritising school attendance, rigid curriculum demands, inflexible programs, and an environment lacking in support for his individual needs, all came at the expense of my child's well-being and safety. These formative years in traditional school deeply traumatised my child. Throughout this time at great cost emotionally and financially, my child was now diagnosed ASD and continued school without the required support to enable him to access an education.

With another suspension at the start of year 4 and with no communication from the school on a return date, we were finally forced to make the decision that our child could not go back into the traditional school environment. I immediately sourced the only viable and legal option for us, registering provisionally with the Home Education Unit and beginning the journey of pursuing a 'non-traditional school' quality education. I explored other education alternatives such as an Autism specific school, sought assistance from medical professionals including paediatricians and psychologists, and spent time to consider and plan for the impact on our lives financially. Thankfully, with the flexibility of learning programs currently available (that will be removed if this bill passes), I was allowed to develop a

goal or project-based learning program aligned and adjusted to my child's interests and abilities. Our plan was supported by and approved by the Home Education Unit.

With much determination, I secured a place in an Autism-specific school for another 4 years of 'classroom/school-based learning'. A short way into year 9, with a leadership shift towards inflexibility and our child now completely refusing to walk into school, for the second time we made the extremely difficult decision to withdraw. Our attempts to secure an exemption through the school principal proved impossible. Despite our child's paediatrician supporting the request, the principal claimed unfamiliarity with the exemption process, leaving us to navigate it independently. Now lapsed, our child has returned to provisional registration with Home Education, and I am using the time as it is designed for, with the hope to provide the best possible educational outcomes for my child. Unfortunately, our efforts to access support for our child within the existing systems have not been successful. This lack of effective support has negatively impacted our child's educational progress and overall well-being. A review of these systems rather than excessive regulation of home education may be necessary to identify areas for improvement and ensure all children receive the support they deserve.

Opposition to the removal of Provisional Registration as a standalone registration option and range of inclusive learning program options

I am strongly opposed to the removal of a separate Provisional Registration period of 60 days from the legislation. This is particularly important for families like mine who had not previously considered Home Education as an option, to continue meeting our legal requirements to provide schooling and to plan a quality education program for our child. When we left traditional schooling as a matter of urgency and registered with the Home Education Unit for a brief period, we were incredibly grateful for the provisional registration period. This flexibility allowed us to smoothly transition into home education, to learn the home-schooling requirements, collect and organise resources, seek allied health professionals support for our child, tailor a program to our child's unique learning needs and consider how as a family we could financially cope. The Home Education Unit's variety of program templates was invaluable, providing options to suit his individual interests and learning style. Removing these options is not inclusive. Without a goal-based or project-based learning program template, my child would not have had successful access to education at home. Our plan was supported by and approved by the Home Education Unit.

To address the concerns of the department regarding the number of repeat applications for provisional registration (made by a minority) and their concerns of extended periods of undocumented learning, may I suggest that the Home Education Unit implement procedures allowing only one provisional registration period and if that lapses contacting the family to check-in or offer support? What is required is an official association made up of true stakeholders that understand the make-up of the home-schooling community. Overall, it feels that most families who home educate are being penalised because of the very few.

Opposition to changes requiring learning to be consistent with ACARA - Australian Curriculum

Using the Australian Curriculum to educate our child at school did not equate to receiving a high-quality education. It is essential that families continue to have the flexibility to choose how they provide a high-quality education for their children. I do not believe that aligning with the Australian Curriculum when home educating means my child is receiving a higher quality of education than more flexible interest led approaches.

Being consistent with the Australian Curriculum or an approved version completely reduces flexibility and will make it especially difficult to design a program. Home schooling families are much more capable of catering for their children's attributes, abilities, and aptitude and providing educational opportunities for emotional, social, physical, and intellectual development without consistency with the Australian Curriculum.

The Australian Curriculum is complex and takes schools and their teams of experienced educators' lengthy amounts of time to understand and implement properly across the year levels. Many schools work to implement and personalise the new curriculum (Australian Curriculum V9.0) learning areas of English and Maths over the period of 2 years. Each term, planning meetings occur with teachers working together to share and plan for the next term of approximately 10 weeks. In my experience, primary teachers plan for (often collaboratively) 4-6 learning areas within one year level. Home schooling families need flexibility to cater to diverse needs and a range of year levels (ability levels) within their family.

Opposition to increased reporting requirements

I strongly oppose the increased reporting requirements for home educators outlined in the proposed legislation. Information provided by home educators already far exceeds the reporting required by Education Queensland schools. Biannual school reports lack evidence of learning and simply list the year level achievement standards with ratings, compiled by various subject-specific teachers, not just one teacher. In schools, parent teacher meetings of between 5 to 15 minutes in length are offered twice yearly to families. The current system, where home educators develop detailed learning programs and provide reports, already demonstrates an elevated level of commitment. These are approved by the Home Education Unit if they are of a quality standard. Demanding even more detailed information for every subject area creates an unreasonable burden on home schooling families. This additional workload takes away valuable time that could be better spent on planning engaging learning experiences and supporting our children's education.

Concerns with lack of transparency and opposition to wording within the guiding principles

I am concerned over proposed changes in the guiding principles of the legislation that states that 'parents have the responsibility for choosing a suitable education environment for their children' and that home education should be provided in a way that 'is in the best interests of the child.' It is unclear here who decides what is in the child's best interests. Surely, we already do this with the provision of a thorough yearlong learning program, currently approved or denied by the Home Education Unit? It is vital that the wording in the guiding principles cannot be misinterpreted.

After watching the public briefing on Monday, 18th March there is a lack of transparency from the Queensland Education Department for the reasons behind some of the amendments. For example, when asked about the possible motives' parents had for moving to home education, the reason stated was the influence of social media, when in fact the Queensland Government commissioned a research insight report into Home Education in November 2022 and reported, "Overall, 2 in 3 families indicate their child has a health issue or disability. This high incidence, along with feedback from families, suggests this is an important consideration when opting to home educate. Many of those in this situation were not initially open to home education but feel it something that became necessary for their child/ren. Here, families typically believe their child copes better in the home environment and their learning style is better suited to instruction at home."

What other options do families have when their children are not the typical, when they are school refusing, struggling with disability, or just not being provided with the supports they need to succeed? Rather than regulate home education and remove flexibility for families, surely the answer is to focus on improving schools to ensure more students can access education. Provide more support in schools, better funding to increase teacher to student ratios and free up the curriculum to focus on the retainment of important literacy and numeracy skills and life skills to ensure a productive and successful future.

Benefits of Home Education in our family

Home-schooling permits our child to thrive in a flexible, project-based learning environment with reduced levels of anxiety. This approach caters to his interests that are wide and varied. They include gardening, trains, public transport, reading, humour, technology, exploring and nature. The development of his strengths and assisting him to development life skills for a fulfilling future is the goal, with the rebuilding of his confidence at the core. He has so many incredible abilities, I must stop myself from wondering what life would have been like if I had not been so determined to 'school' him.

Thank you for taking the time to review my concerns about the proposed amendments to the Education legislation.