

## Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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## Overview of concerns about the changes proposed to home education:

I have four main concerns about the proposed bill, which is drawn from (1) my work as a university lecturer in teacher education, (2) my 18 years of experience as a High school teacher and (3) my 5 years as a home-schooling parent. These concerns are:

- The proposed application process.
- The meaning of 'High quality education' in the context of home education.
- Proposed reporting requirements
- The requirement for parents to prove that home education is in the best interest of the child.

I will address each of my concerns below.

## Application process

The stated goal is to reduce the reporting burden on both HEU and parents. This just adds to it unnecessarily. It is beyond HEUs jurisdiction to assess learning that happens outside of registration, asking for this assumes learning doesn't naturally happen through living life. In many cases, it's disrespectful to assume parents don't have their children's best interests at heart. If they are swapping and changing it because they are looking for the right fit for their family, not because they are avoiding educating their kids. Our daughter started with one curriculum, that appeared to be too challenging for her needs at the time and we switched to a new one that she connected with, and she was excited and motivated to complete it.

In some cases, parents changing curriculum, or learning plans are doing so alongside major life changes (new babies, changing financial circumstances, school

trauma, homelessness, domestic violence) they need time and support, not extra monitoring.

The figures provided as examples in this consultation paper are a direct result of school upheaval due to covid19. They are not representative of the norm and as such should not be the statistics used to determine future needs. It is unreasonable to instill tighter legislation on the home-schooling population.

School children take six weeks off over Christmas every year and that is considered acceptable, as such it makes no sense to have any fear of a lack of quality education occurring during this time period. HEU should be provided with adequate staff to ensure a fast turnaround on assessing these plans if the Department of Education is concerned about children not receiving a high-quality education during plan processing time.

The proposed process does not adequately cater for unforeseen circumstances, especially with the proposed removal of provisional registration and streamlining to one application process. In particular, I am concerned children withdrawn due to bullying could be placed at risk, if the application process cannot be finalised in a timely manner.

Several years ago, 30 days wouldn't have been enough to deal with the covid insecurities or cover the lockdown schooling times. It also wouldn't be enough to cover everyone caught in natural disasters and 30 days isn't nearly long enough to deal with child school trauma or fleeing domestic violence.

## Meaning of a 'high-quality education' in the context of home education

To adequately define High quality education, a definition must be able to be applied to both school and alternative settings, basing 'high Quality' on a curriculum is both risky and inflexible.

The definition of 'high quality education' as proposed in this consultation paper relies on the Australian Curriculum, but does not adequately leave room for alternative education settings. It does not consider skills and abilities applied outside of school settings. High quality learning should not be standardised, Basing a definition on a curriculum removes the child-centred approach for which a curriculum is usually designed, and for which home education is renowned. If you define 'high-quality education' with a curriculum emphasis, then that puts the curriculum before the child, to their detriment.

Leo Thompson in 'Why and how you could define high-quality learning to guide your school's pedagogical approach?' posits "High-quality learning and teaching (HQLT) is both context and culture dependent and cannot be defined and measured in absolute, universal terms. In fact, depending upon how you define it, one could make a case that HQLT could, and even should, look quite different in every school...'

According to Thompson, High Quality learning is not absolute. In fact it could be just as easily applied to Home Education as to an educational institution and it too nebulous to define in absolute terms.

A UNICEF paper defining quality in education (2000), by Colby, Witt and associates, suggests "Many definitions of quality in education exist, testifying to the complexity and multifaceted nature of the concept. The terms efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality have often been used synonymously.." Efficiency, effectiveness, equity and quality can all be applied in alternative educational settings. Home education can be efficient, effective, provide equity for students who have been failed by a school system, and can provide quality and meaning in ways that are relevant for the students involved. The paper goes on to say that Quality education includes "Learners who are healthy, well-nourished and ready to participate and learn, and supported in learning by their families and communities;" Home educating families are committed to supporting their students, and this commitment often flows into their communities. Home educated students are often motivated, ready to learn and participate in the learning process.

In UNESCO paper (2016), Philip Stabback posits "Some useful indicators of a quality curriculum have to do with its relevance, consistency, practicality, effectiveness and sustainability..." Again, this can all be applied to home education settings, with students needs considered and their interests built into their learning experiences.

This proposal does not appropriately, define high quality learning, and it ignores the home education philosophies that allow it to be a high quality education. The HEU would be more efficient in determining what a high-quality education looks like for all learners, by employing people who have actually home-schooled and understand the different philosophies in play.

The majority of states in Australia do not define high-quality education. Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria and the ACT currently expect learning across multiple subjects. Only Western Australia and the Northern Territory require the use of ACARA or the state based alternative, with NSW using its own curriculum. There is no evidence to suggest that home-schooled children in any one state are receiving a superior or lower quality education, so there is no need for this definition or alignment with ACARA.

ACARA is not flexible enough to accommodate the needs and interests all children, and a definition of high-quality learning that emphasises ACARA should not be part of the home educating requirements. Home educators don't need ACARA placed within the definitions of 'high-quality education' as all home-schooling families are aware it is available to use should they want it as a part of providing one version of high-quality education. ACARA in no way defines a high-quality education and nor was it ever intended to.

ACARA itself wasn't written for parents. The document itself states as much in the parent sections. As such it is impossible to capture all the learning styles and philosophies of home education with this curriculum.

I was part of a forum on the Australian curriculum Shape Paper for the arts in 2011, we understood that this document was designed for school use and that there were no home educators or Home education bodies represented in the consultations on this document. Such an inflexible document could not be the basis for an effective definition of High quality learning and then applied to situations that were excluded from its creation.

Home educators should not be forced into making token efforts to link their children's education to ACARA to tick paperwork boxes. High-quality education for many children looks very different as it does in a vast landscape of home-schooling across Australia. Parents are the most qualified person to determine what that looks like for their own children.

Home educators need greater flexibility and lower oversight and the proposed registration requirements would result in the opposite.

## Reporting on education progress

I support reports on educational progress, rather than a focus on the learning plan because the former is child-centric, allowing a student to truly shine, whilst the latter is simply box-ticking of parental compliance with a plan, which is not a hallmark of 'high quality education'. Additionally, as new home-schoolers quickly discover, plans very often change. Being required to report on how well plans were implemented would cause stress to families and prevent parents from being able to make the kinds of pedagogical decisions teachers make daily- like adjusting a plan that isn't working. Teachers aren't always required to prove children have improved so parents, who are not trained in reporting the way teachers are, should not be held to a higher standard.

The current reporting requirements - two comparative, annotated samples for subjects – do not help to show the educational progress that a child has made, when

factoring in that reporting can look different for every child within a family or home educating group. Reporting should focus on learning progress, and this looks different for every child, including in school settings. As long as a parent can demonstrate that their child has learned well, they should not need to prove that they followed their original learning plan. Changing plans in response to a child's learning needs, demonstrates successful teaching and learning as it does in a school setting.

I don't believe reporting should be based on the plan provided or progress. Many home educators can demonstrate high-quality learning without these links, they should not be responsible for HEUs inability to assess what a high-quality education looks like.

Since teachers have some flexibility and choice in how they assess students, there needs to be more flexibility in how home educators can demonstrate their child's learning. Alternatives to samples such as learning diaries, photos, or a zoom consultation and other ideas should be considered. Some parents may want to write a paragraph for each subject, explaining how their child went. This would outline their strengths and where they need to focus for improvement.

It's important for home educators not to be restricted to one format or template for reporting as the ones provided are always unnecessarily onerous and unclear. They also don't support all home-schooling philosophies or consider the workload for families with multiple students.

## Streamlining review of written reports

I support all families keeping on-going evidence/records of their children's learning. Then, those families who are to be audited could be supported by a paid, independent intermediary (with home-schooling experience). This would help families to understand the reporting process, while also assisting HEU staff to assess high-quality learning in the home education context.

The Department should not require families to keep long-term records of learning progress (e.g. any work samples older than two years). Any sampling approach which required long-term records would be particularly problematic for travelling home educating families. Teachers are not always required to keep long term samples, and this appears to be placing higher standards on parents than teachers.

## Removing requirement to issue a certificate of registration:

I do not support removing the requirement for issuing a Certificate of Registration because these are used for home-schoolers to access some resources and also excursions. Centrelink requires it as an initial application for mutual exemption. The letter works as a replacement but it never arrives in time to meet the requirement as report processing times are so long, it could marginalise families who are home-schooling their special needs children.

Online and international resources often require a certificate, they only accept a certificate of registration, including but not limited to Canva.

There are lots of uses for the certificate, but primarily it is a significant keepsake for a child's time home-schooling. They don't get report cards, awards or other school memorabilia so having this is a valuable memento of their time home-schooling.

I propose an annual, dated certificate in hard copy or digital sent on the anniversary of initial registration and not linked to reporting in any way. This would be far more useful and recognised in the community.

## Expanding grounds for cancellation of registration

The registration should be valid with the registered parent(s)/teacher, no matter the location of the education delivery if they are delivering it personally.

In order to agree to the inclusion of these additional grounds for cancellation, we would need to review the definition of home-schooling. It is quite clear from our time in lockdown that home-schooling is not just about learning primarily at home in a 'school at home scenario'. Our out-of-home experiences are a large part of a home educator's ability to provide a high-quality education. Changing educational environments beyond the home directly responds to and supports individual children's learning styles and our educational philosophy. So while the definition of home-schooling is based on learning at home, I cannot agree with these inclusions.

It is important for home educators to retain the freedom to explore diverse learning environments as frequently as possible to support the delivery of a high-quality education. As such cancellation based on location is unacceptable.

Displacement by natural disaster has affected many families and would have resulted in cancellation according to these criteria. I don't think this is the intention behind the change but it could happen to families already displaced.

No one should ever have their registration cancelled, outside of child safety reasons. Home-schooling is often a last resort after students and families have already tried everything else possible. If the schools have failed a child, the Department of Education should be providing parents with enough support to ensure there is never a cancellation.

## Home-schooling in the best interest of the child

The requirement for parents to prove that home education is in the best interest of the child should be removed. Parents should be the primary decision maker for their child's education and there should be any

Many parents home educate for various reasons, in my experience the most common reasons include:

- a) a perceived failure of schools to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their students. Many families turn to home-schooling because their children have special needs which the school has been unable to adequately support. Or their child may have been bullied and carries school trauma. If families were satisfied that their child's needs were being met they would keep their child in school.
- b) School refusal has increased, with mental health issues cited as main drivers for school refusal. School refusal is associated often with severe distress that students experience in the school setting. Rigid School- like settings at home, are unlikely to be effective for these students. Aside from the cost to the Australian economy, school refusal can be dire for many students and suicide has increased for many students with severe emotional distress. Home education can provide a viable and healing alternative for these students, leading to positive outcomes for the student and their families.
- c) Lack of appropriate educational opportunities for students with specific interests or abilities.

Parents and families in these situations should not have to justify why home-schooling is in the best interests of their child(ren), thus adding to the trauma of an already overwhelming situation.

Parents who made a conscious and committed choice to home-school their child from the beginning of their schooling should be given the freedom to make that choice without restriction, particularly those in rural settings or of religious or cultural backgrounds, who lack access to a suitable educational environment that is responsive to the students needs.



## Concluding statement

Learning is not a 9-3 scenario and it should allow students to follow a passion, grow, and be active and informed citizens. A customised personalised curriculum will be beneficial for both students and their families. Marbina, Church and Tayler (2011) found that “For learning to be engaging and relevant, successful integrated approaches to learning and teaching should support and build on children’s skills and interests.” Home-schooling in the main builds on students strengths and their skills, allow their interests and motivations to be fostered in a safe environment and at a pace that works for the individual child.

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