


Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Submission

EDUCATION (GENERAL PROVISIONS) AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL 2024

Who am I: I am the father of three home-educated neurodivergent children (ASD2, GAD, ADHD) aged 12, 10 and 8. My wife is the registered parent responsible for home-educating, but we are both involved in our children's education. We both have post-graduate degrees in scientific fields, and, between us, have experienced pre-tertiary education in public and private (secular and religious) institutions and in two countries. I presently work in the private sector, heavily utilising the skills obtained in my tertiary education, but have, in the past, taught mathematics and biology at the tertiary level as well as, more recently, worked as a mathematics tutor to high school students in Queensland.

Why we home-educate: My wife and I home-educate our children for two main sets of reasons. The initial motivation came from my experience as a doctoral student and later research fellow and tutor at Oxford University. During my 11 years there, I met and taught hundreds of exceptional graduate and undergraduates from an enormous range of countries and educational backgrounds. I drew many conclusions from this experience, the most salient of which were:

- (1) My Queensland state school education had been sorely lacking; and
- (2) Some of the most spectacularly original, grounded and self-directed students I met had been home-educated, and I wanted that for my children.

The second set of reasons why we home-educate, which were not part of our initial motivation, have to do with our children's learning needs and styles arising from their neurodivergence together with the negative (behavioural and educational) experiences of friends' and acquaintances' neurodivergent children at mainstream schools.

Comments on the proposed education legislation submitted to parliament on 06/03/24

(<https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/whole/html/bill.first/bill-2022-052>). The following comments are in response to the bullet points given on page 15 of the Statement of Compatibility (<https://documents.parliament.qld.gov.au/tp/2024/5724T308-00A0.pdf>)

(1) Include a new guiding principle that sets out that home education should be provided in a way that is in the best interests of the child or young person, taking into account the child's safety, wellbeing and access to a high-quality education.

I have concerns regarding the proposed addition of section 7(da) to the EPGA. The terms "best interests of the child" in section 7(da)(i) and "high-quality education" in section 7(da)(ii) seem to put a significant onus of proof on the home educating parent. The notion of a high-quality education is probably undefinable in anything but the broadest sense. It certainly isn't uniquely synonymous with an ACARA approved curricula. As reported in the Public Briefing on 18th March 2024 only 20% of home-schoolers use the Australian Curriculum. There are many students who have attended or are currently attending mainstream school in Queensland who are being badly failed by the system. Indeed, I have tutored some of them, yet they would be considered as having a "high-quality education" simply by attending school, regardless of their individual educational outcomes, and

many of the home-educating families we know have been driven to home-educating because of the failure of schools to ensure the safety, wellbeing and adequate education of their children. It seems unreasonable to put such an onus on home-educating parents as section 7(da) when one of the main drivers to home-educating, in my experience, is the failure of schools to satisfy 7(da). If I and my wife believed that our children would get a “high-quality education in the best interests of our children”, we would probably be sending them to school instead of incurring all the work and stress of providing that education ourselves and in the process restricting our family to a single income.

In summary, rather than adding an onus of proof to home-educating families we should be asking **“if schools are providing high-quality education in the best interests of the child, why have parents ‘voted’ otherwise and home-schooling enrolments increased by 194% in the past 5 years?”**

(2) Requiring a child’s educational program for home education to be consistent with an approved curriculum;

Home-education, in general, is not the same as school at home. School curricula are designed for the environment in which they are executed and for a particular societal purpose. Schooling and education are not synonymous.

Apart from the Australian Curriculum, ACARA recognises two other curricula (International Baccalaureate Primary Years Program and Middle Years Program & Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework). Other than the ability for a child to “slot back into” regular schooling, what advantage is there for home-educators in following a curriculum designed for classes of 25 to 30 children of varying abilities?

One of the main advantages of home-education is that one can tailor a curriculum to the interests and abilities of an individual child. For instance, in the Australian Curriculum, individual mathematical concepts (e.g. percentages, decimals and fractions) are developed over many years. What we have found is that, for two of our children, there is a moment when they are ready for a concept and at that point it often serves their learning best to run through the multi-year entirety of the concept over a continuous period so that they achieve mastery that sticks, rather than taking small steps each year which, in our experience, are quickly forgotten.

Moreover, as we are dealing with only three children, we can be flexible. Whilst we have an idea of what we want to achieve each year, we are in a position to deviate from our plans; when something takes one of their interests, we run with it. It was my personal experience, like many people I know, that standard schooling nearly snuffed out my love of learning, which I only regained in university when I was able to direct my own learning to some extent. As I write this my 10 year old son is reading a 500 page book on Greek mythology. There is no way we could have assigned that book to him and expected him to read it. He had to decide he wanted to read it himself. Would it make any educational sense for me to redirect him from that book, which he is devouring, to whatever he is “meant to be doing” in the Australian Curriculum at this precise instant? You can’t force that sort of engagement.

Forcing parents to teach to a generic curriculum is also likely to lead to absurdities. For instance, I

suspect two of my three children will be more than capable and, more importantly, interested in pursuing university level mathematics course by the age of 13. *The addition to section 217 of the legislation, Section 217(3), defines what an approved education and training program means for home schooling but there is no provision for university level studies in this section.* Whilst there is nothing stopping us from enrolling them in such courses at that time in addition to the Australian Curriculum, what would be the purpose of having to report and show progress on part of the curriculum they have already left far behind?

On the flipside, unlike in a classroom of children of similar ages, home-education often consists of a parent teaching multiple children of different but not intellectually incompatible ages. Having to run three completely different year curricula simultaneously would be an incredible burden. Our children are similar enough in age (at present) that we very often teach the same topic to all three children at the same time, with individual accommodations made for age and ability.

Although not relevant to my children at this point in time, it should be noted that the QCAA syllabus, the approved option for senior secondary students, is not suitable for a home setting.

Our hope is that, as our children age, once we have given them a basic framework, we will be able to let them decide more and more what they want to learn, progressing to a system of education more akin to “unschooling with guidance.” This is clearly incompatible with following a fixed curriculum. It is my belief that one retains much more of what one chooses to learn rather than what one has been forced to learn. When I reflect on my own school experience, the things I still know in any depth, beyond basic literacy and numeracy, are largely the things I chose to learn.

Finally, all national curricula, beyond literacy and numeracy, are political in nature. What is specified as core learning and what is not is far from value free. They are designed to produce a certain type of citizen with certain thought processes, abilities and beliefs. I have found from my experience that, for instance, those who have gone to the top English public schools, home-educated children, and those who have had a classical Trivium style education have very different thought patterns from those who have gone to state schools. In the highly competitive world we live in, thinking outside of the herd is valuable. We want that for our children and would see the imposition of the Australian Curriculum as a direct attack on the quality of our children’s education.

(3) Strengthening parent reporting requirements;

Presently, annual reporting requires individual reports on numeracy, literacy and one other subject area, together with suitably spaced samples showing improvement together with a plan for the year. For three children, this is time consuming, but we understand the necessity. Having to provide a report focusses us on what has happened through the year and what needs to be altered.

Having said that, the proposal that reporting would be required for all eight subject areas of the Australian Curriculum (or other approved curriculum) for each student every year would be burdensome and highly disruptive. Moreover, the eight subject areas per year approach for young children feels like box ticking dilettantism. We don’t usually cover all eight subject areas spread evenly across the year, but rather we delve into topics in depth over concentrated periods of time.

Some years we are focussed on geography, other years on science etc.

(4) Insertion of ACARA approved curriculum into Human Rights Statement of Compatibility

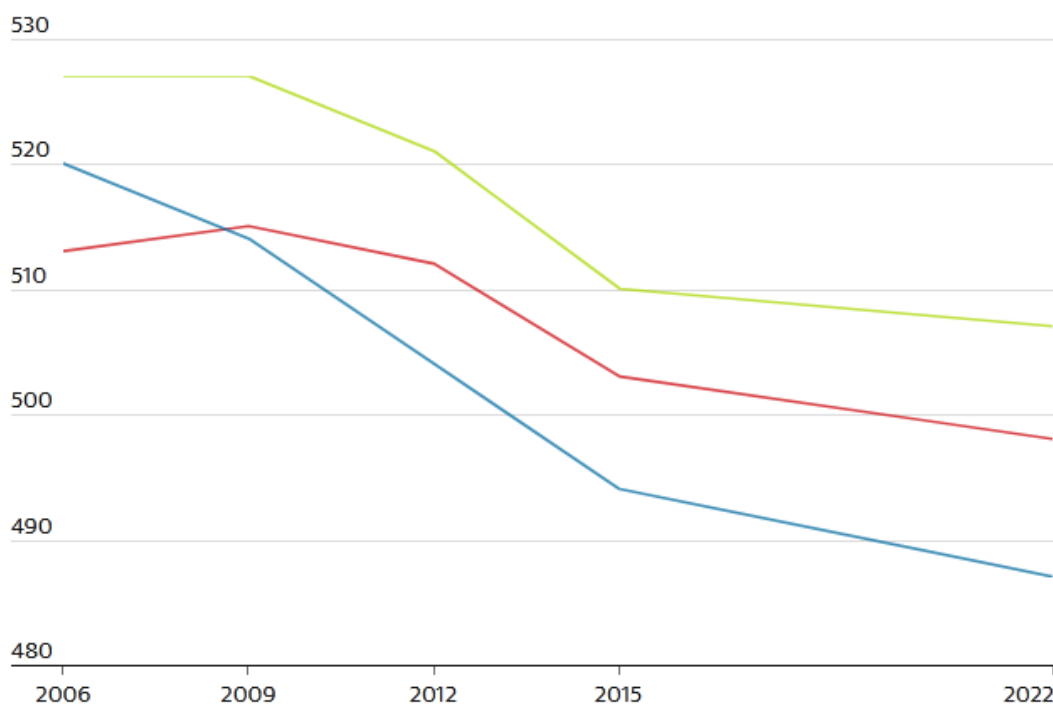
In particular, from page 15 of the statement of compatibility with the human rights Act 2019 (<https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/pdf/bill.first.hrc/bill-2022-052>): *The proposed amendments promote the right to education by enhancing home education as a viable and effective alternative to education in a school setting, with appropriate regulatory oversight, including by ensuring a child registered for home education is accessing an educational program **consistent with the Australian Curriculum or Queensland syllabus for senior subjects**, which are used in Queensland schools*

The leap of logic in this statement is interesting. It somehow implies that the rights of a child to education are enhanced by that child being taught in accordance with the Australian Curriculum. It should perhaps be noted at this point that whilst Australia's PISA scores are above the OECD average, the absolute scores have been continuously dropping since 2003:

Australia's performance over time

Mean scores for Science, Reading and Mathematics has declined

■ Science ■ Reading ■ Mathematics



Guardian graphic | Source: PISA 2022 report, Department of Education and Training

In 2022 Australia was 11th (13th in mathematics) with a lower performance than: Singapore, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Estonia, Canada, Ireland and Switzerland. If the aim therefore is to enhance the education of the child, and if the curriculum used is the major determining factor, surely we should be implementing the Singapore curriculum? It should also be noted that a good proportion of home educated children access university level courses, above their putative school levels.

(5) No clear explanation of how the new legislation will translate into policy

This is self-explanatory.

(6) Comment on the public briefing of the Education, Employment Training and Skills Committee

During the public briefing on the proposed amendments to the EGPA it was stated that the percentage of families using the Australian Curriculum was (only) 20%. My personal feeling is that 20% is an overstatement. The HEU suggested format is an ACARA styled template, which many parents (ourselves included) fill in and would, therefore be counted within the 20%. We do not, however, actually slavishly devote ourselves to it, as it would limit our children's education severely. Children learn, and are ready to learn, at different times. Our son for example, in mathematics, ranges in his abilities in various topics from material covered in Grade 4 to Grade 8+. All three children do science topics well above their putative curriculum level and our eldest has done English topics from Grade 10, yet all three also have areas in which they struggle more, and are below their levels. In these areas we are able to help and support them more, just as we are able to extend them to their limits in those subjects in which they excel or have an interest. This is only possible through the individualised learning we provide for our children, which is not tied to a cookie cutter "one size fits all" or at least fits a class of 30 with an overworked teacher who has to devote most of their time to the disruptive students who are unwilling to learn.

The continual assertion "but 20% do" shows either a remarkable lack of insight into the home education community, or a wilful desire not to acknowledge that the home education community, in the majority, rejects the Australian Curriculum. A rate of 1 in 5 is not generally considered to be indicative of success or indeed potential success. The question must be asked, ***why do 80% of home educators choose not to use the Australian Curriculum***, especially as it is easily accessed and provided in great detail? If a medication cured a maximum of one person in 5, but was harmful to the other 4, would it be rolled out?

It should also be remembered that the many children are home educated due to neurodiversity. They simply do not learn the same way that neurotypical children do, and to ignore this is to reduce their future potential significantly. By forcing an ASD/ADHD child into an environment they find incredibly hard to deal with, causing them overwhelm and sensory overload, you are not in any way enhancing their education or indeed their quality of life. I would instead suggest that you are actually causing harm to their future prospects, their current and future mental health, and denying them their right to a good education.

In summary, my wife and I want the best education possible for our children, and are deeply concerned that these proposals run counter to that aim. By all estimates there are more unregistered children being home educated in Queensland than registered children. The proposed changes to the legislation are going to do nothing to encourage the unregistered to change their status.