

Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024

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Submitted by: [REDACTED]
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To the Hon Di Farmer MP,

I write to express my concerns over the proposed legislative changes in education aimed at Homeschool Educators. These amendments to Clause 217 and Section 7 will impact my family directly, and not to our benefit.

Given the lack of official state-level representation for Home Educators, we rely on the expertise of unpaid, yet seasoned Home Educators as embodied by Amanda Bartle and Rose P Fitzgerald, and these (our representatives) have been categorically and deliberately excluded from participation in any discussion of the proposed amendments. Conversely, I have been made aware that the Department of Education (DoE) has been courting potential service providers whilst simultaneously avoiding any meaningful dialogue with those most affected by changes. As such, I feel I have not been given a voice.

The proposed changes appear to be driven by a distinct lack of understanding or interest in the motivations and outcomes for those engaged in homeschooling. Misleading statements to the press (suggesting there is currently no oversight of Home Educating households and effectively that "Home-school is No-School") shows a contempt for Home Education and does little to boost confidence in the DoE's ability to represent the Homeschooling community fairly and accurately.

It is incomprehensible that the DoE obstinately refuses to acknowledge the ongoing systemic failures of mainstream education. It is mainstream education itself which has led to the explosion in number of families undertaking homeschooling. As a mother formerly educated through the public system, I had never entertained the thought of homeschooling my own children. Yet the mistreatment and injustices we faced, forced our hand.

My son suffered severe anxiety because his neurodivergent needs were not being met in mainstream education. To provide just one example of our experience in the public system, one day I had rung the school to advise I couldn't get him to attend because he was highly anxious. In response I was threatened to get him there "at all costs." I stupidly complied with the demand and after a stressful effort to get him ready and in the car, I embarked on what turned out to be a dangerous drive, transporting my highly dysregulated child to school. Upon arrival, we were met by four members of staff waiting at the gates. My highly distressed and now terrified seven-year-old child was then dragged from the car and pinned to the ground like a criminal by four grown adults. How was that not assault? How did the school imagine he was going to engage in any learning that day or thereafter given the extreme measures employed to enforce compliance? According to Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs', my son's physical and psychological safety needs were ignored. Therefore, any and all attempts to educate him were null and void. He could not and did not follow ACARA with any measurable evidence of success.

I could provide pages of problematic behaviours by staff and the failings of mainstream education. Sadly, the above account was just one of many appalling incidents we had to endure. It was not what one might call 'delivering a quality education in the best interests of the child'. Continuous suspensions stemming from an inflexible system and my son's inability to cope, only rewarded my son with the safe haven of home. In contrast, the multiple suspensions meant I had to continuously take time off work which disrupted my employment. The DoE was effectively punishing me as a parent for alleged behaviours that occurred while in their duty of care, while scapegoating and pinning it on parenting.

Our faith in the DoE was further eroded when we were denied access to school records. One can only assume that we were denied in fear that we might discover a misrepresentation of the truth, with records invested in the self-preservation of staff and the DoE for their actions, rather than serving the best interest of a child in their care. We were

disadvantaged insofar as we could not challenge the contents of the reports and hence were denied due process. My child's school file followed him like a criminal record, preventing a fresh start. This, combined with 'catchment policies', meant alternate public education options were limited.

Had I not been fully focused on dealing with my son's repeated suicide attempts arising from his public school experience, I would not have hesitated in pursuing legal action against the department for failing my child and marginalising our family so comprehensively. Our "mainstream" educational experience was not just traumatic for our son, but extremely traumatic for our entire extended family. How was mainstream education acting in the best interests of my child? One must question the singular focus of the DoE on academic results and compliance above all else. Where is the focus on welfare and wellbeing beyond mere lip service? Without mental health, all academic outcomes are null and void.

My son's high IQ (verified as gifted) precluded him from attendance at a specialist school. I was explicitly told by the DoE that "there were no options" for my son, and that I would "have to homeschool him" if I wasn't prepared to put him into a 'Positive Learning Centre' lockdown facility. Positive for who? Yes, you read that right. In this day and age, the DoE is still trying to lock up children with disabilities who they feel can't or won't comply with a one size fits all approach. There appears to be no consideration of the fact that perhaps "unwanted behaviours" stem from school-based trauma.

The DoE did not meet the best interests of my child and denied his 'right to an education' (ACARA or otherwise) unless I was willing to deliver it. Therefore, it is insulting to suggest that I need to prove that what I am doing is in the best interests of my son and that he is receiving a quality education. This was never delivered in mainstream schooling. Now that I have embraced all that homeschooling has to offer, I will never look back because of the positive changes I have seen in my son. Yet make no mistake about it, having to provide our own education has come at a significant cost to our family - financially, emotionally, career-wise, and in just about every other way you can imagine. A responsibility that was palmed off to me when it became 'all too hard' for the DoE.

Providing my own education for my son has become a full-time role in addition to my other responsibilities. Not only do I now need to deliver his education (and note that 'educational needs' are not supported by NDIS as this is considered an Education Department responsibility), but additionally I have had to take on a fulltime caring role because my son is now at home during the day. To ensure we can meet the basic necessities of living, I need to find ways to earn an income after giving up my employment, all the while managing family responsibilities which has become a stressful juggling act. Yet never once has my son's education suffered. Where the DoE failed to deliver an effective education, my son now learns in a way that is responsive to his needs.

I have made a considerable sacrifice in the interest of my son's mental health and education. I have, and will continue to be, successful in providing what he needs to flourish and become a contributing member of our community to the best of his ability, with no thanks to the DoE. With my limited time I am already required to comply with DoE policy, by demonstrating that I provide a quality education through planning and reporting requirements. Adding additional burdensome reporting measures to an already sufficient process seems unduly punitive toward Home Educators. Ironically, a "quality education in the best interests of my child" is something that the Department itself could not provide. There is a glaring double standard in evidence here.

Our "mainstream" educational experience was traumatic. How can it be acting in my child's best interest if it triggers the trauma of a "one size fits all" education? By placing unrealistic demands on a child who can't cope and thus placing them at risk of harm? By placing

unrealistic demands on homeschooling families? Whose interest does it serve? Because it is not the Home Education community, who have stated (loudly) that they don't want more bureaucracy impeding their homeschooling journey and progress, nor would it be the taxpayer left to absorb the costs of reintegrating the 10,000 plus households currently homeschooling.

Am I paid to provide the education to my son, which lessens the burden on your department? No, I am not paid a teacher's salary for the role that was forced upon me when mainstream education failed. If the DoE continues to ignore feedback as to how forcing the ACARA & QCAA may damage and further marginalise families such as ours, then perhaps we should demand to be paid the equivalent of a teacher's wage. Apparently, teacher training is not a necessary requirement if this proposal is to be implemented. How do Teachers feel about being duped into a university debt and wasting their time in professional development if any layperson on Earth can step into the same role with no experience or support?

As a homeschooling parent, I ask:

- Where is the research on how, where, and why mainstream schools are failing, leading to the growth in homeschooling? Is it too forthright to suggest the DoE focus of fixing that which is so clearly broken....?
- Why is the department obstructing rather supporting alternative means of education which reduces the Department's burden of having to deal with "difficult" children?
- Why isn't the department instead examining the implementation of its inclusive education policies to see how effectively they are being carried out? On that matter, where are the studies on how many children with disabilities change schools to try and find the right support, and how many of those are eventually forced out altogether?
- Where is the evidence that learning broad information in all subject areas is the most effective way to learn? Is knowing very little about everything necessary in today's world – especially when everything is readily available online? Perhaps mastery over one or two interest areas is more aligned with future need?
- Why isn't the DoE taking a balanced approach and considering the multiple success stories of homeschoolers, including many famous examples? Why does it instead insist on creating policies around a negative minority, rather than the positive majority?
- Why isn't the DoE objectively considering whether individualised learning journeys (as experienced in homeschooling) are just as effective as rigid mainstream approaches?

Homeschooling is popular because it is a culture (not 'cult') where students can forge their own identity, nurture their confidence, and follow their passion. Unlike traditional education, they learn to love learning - not fear or hate it. Just like the workforce culture is changing and businesses are forced to adapt or die, homeschooling rejects the notion that there is only one approach to learning and is instead aligned to the currency of the future. The DoE can look to the future and support positive changes (that your tax paying community clearly wants and needs) or stay with the sinking ship of antiquated approaches that no longer serve modern society.

I urge the government and the DoE to reconsider its ill-advised position. I ask that all references to homeschooling be removed from this bill, and that the DoE undertake rigorous, and genuine consultation with stakeholders. It is clearly evident that this has not occurred, and my hope is that the committee might genuinely collaborate with all interested members of the community that it serves.