

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

**Submission No:** 1905  
**Submitted by:** [REDACTED]  
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**Submitter Comments:**

**Please do not publish name/contact information**

Name: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Phone: [REDACTED]

**Please do not publish name/contact information**

## **Submission on the proposed Education (General Provisions) and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2024**

*Our children have learned at home successfully for over eight years.*

My two children, now aged 12 and 14, have been registered for home education since they were each of school age. They participate in a number of weekly group learning, social, and sports activities with other home-educating families and are also very active in Scouts where they interact with a broad cross-section of children and adults.

We use two main modes of learning. The first is where I lead the activities, set learning goals, and provide course materials. The second is self-directed learning where they have ample time to pursue their own interests using the plethora of resources available online or from our local libraries. As a result, they have already acquired numerous artistic and technical skills far beyond what I know or am able to share. More importantly, they now know what it takes to learn *deeply* through pursuing projects that are relevant to their own interests. Being “lifelong learners” will be critical to them during the 21st century, along with all the other problem solving and creative skills they are practising.

*Some of the proposed changes to the EGPA are unjustified and burdensome*

I do not support the proposed amendment to Section 7 to require home education be provided in a way that is in the “best interests” of the child. While this is a noble goal, it is fraught with difficulties in interpretation and application: what does it actually mean, who will decide, and on what basis? Beyond ensuring that children are safe from obvious harm, it is surely an overreach of a government to presume it can predict what is in the “best interests” of a child.

As a long-time home educating parent, I also do not support the proposed amendment to Section 217 to require home education to be “consistent with an approved education and training program” (e.g. the Australian Curriculum) and that the parent report on student progress across *all* learning areas in such a program. As described in more detail below, I think that this requirement places an unnecessary burden on parents when there are so many approaches to learning and excellent resources available (globally) that are not approved by ACARA.

*There is no evidence that the Australian Curriculum represents “best practice.”*

I acknowledge that following the Australian Curriculum may be of some benefit to home-educated students in specific circumstances, such as when they expect to return to

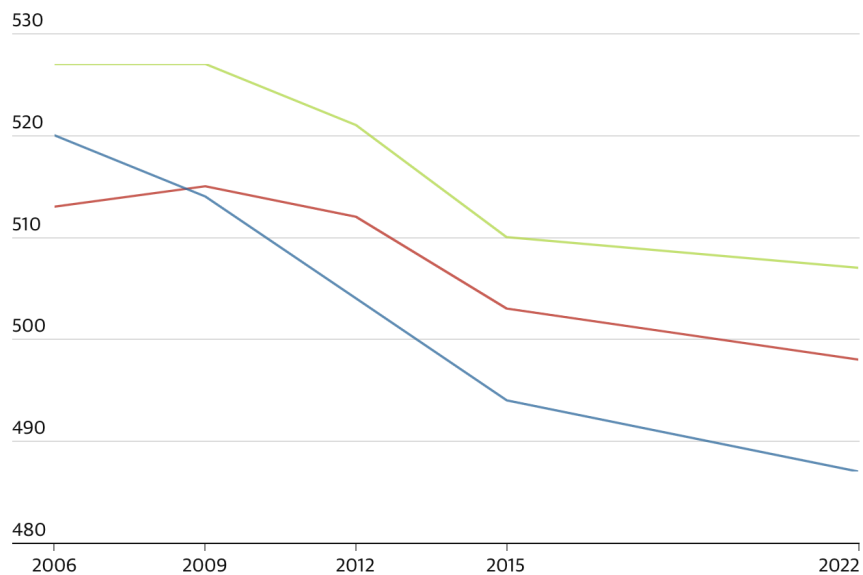
mainstream schooling at some stage. Under the current home education regulation, it is already possible for families to make this choice when the circumstances warrant it.<sup>1</sup>

However, there are many reasons against requiring that all home educators follow an ACARA-approved curriculum. The first among these is that there are flaws in the Australian Curriculum and its real-world use. While correlation does not imply causation, the performance of Australian students in the “Programme for International Student Assessment” (PISA) has declined over the past two decades despite the Australian Curriculum being available since 2010, as shown below:

### 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

from: Cassidy (2023)

One focused benchmark of the Australian Curriculum on *science learning* against other countries by Jensen et al. (2023) argued that “**a fundamental cause of Australia’s education decline is the Australian Curriculum.**” They noted that the Australian science curriculum contains far less science content and lacks both breadth and depth of learning compared to other systems.

<sup>1</sup> Also, there is flexibility in how the Australian Curriculum is applied by schools, so following the Curriculum can still lead to knowledge gaps or repetition.

The CEO of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) suggests:

“School curriculum should give greater priority to developing deeper conceptual understandings and the ability to apply those understandings to meaningful contexts. Currently, many school curricula are designed instead to build extensive factual and procedural knowledge, sometimes at the expense of conceptual understanding. This is a particular issue in crowded curricula that promote memorization and reproduction of taught content, reinforced by aligned tests and examinations—a feature of many secondary school curricula.” (Masters, 2023, p187-188)

Deep learning is at the core of how my children currently learn. They often “learn by doing” to further their self-directed projects. I am aware of their current interests and can highlight how one topic they might be learning is related to something else they are doing. I will often seek out resources or courses that fit into their current interests to ensure maximum engagement with the educational content. The “crowding out effect” applies to learning: if we had to follow an arbitrary and cluttered curriculum, I believe the children would not have the required time and mental “space” to undertake project-based learning to such an extent.

The Australian Curriculum lists a variety of content to be taught to children at a given grade/age. However, this is a challenging endeavour. As Masters (2023) notes:

“Commonly, the difference between the most and least advanced learners in any grade is equivalent to the average progress students make over 5 or more years of school. In other words, students often have very different learning needs; material at an appropriate level for some can be inappropriately easy or inappropriately difficult for others.” (p188)

In contrast, as a home educator, I can tailor educational plans specifically for my children. I use high quality resources (e.g. Khan Academy, Brilliant.org, Great Courses, YouTube channels, OpenStax textbooks, Duolingo, etc.) as the core material. These resources are not developed with the Australian Curriculum in mind (as most are developed in the USA). However, such resources are often produced by people passionate about the subject matter and often contain deep insights that may be lost in a curriculum designed by a committee. I also tap into my own educational and work experiences to provide deeper and broader learning resources than what would typically be available in schools.

*The proposed planning and reporting requirements will be onerous on home-educating families (and likely on Department of Education staff).*

The current reporting framework is appropriate and sufficient. We provide samples of the child’s literacy, numeracy, and work in another different subject area each year. Where this is insufficient, the Home Education Unit requests further samples.

The proposed changes would require home educators to specifically align their learning plan to the Australian Curriculum. More extensive reporting across *all* Curriculum learning areas would also be required. This would take considerably more effort than the current practice, reducing time home educators can spend assisting their children in their learning activities. It would provide no benefit to the students.

*Home-educating families aim to better meet the needs of their children than alternatives, and we expect better consultation about this.*

There are many opportunities for improvement in the Australian school system which is one of the reasons we educate at home. It is possible with today's technology to allow personalised learning. This capability questions the whole premise of a "curriculum" approach to education in "grades." Indeed, perhaps one solution to poor student engagement and disruption in classrooms is to develop/enhance a learning platform (similar to Khan Academy) to provide integrated learning modules across a variety of interests and projects, whilst tracking the knowledge and skills acquired. Teachers can be "mentors" to help guide students toward balanced learning rather than attempt to "teach" a diverse classroom the same material. Students with more opportunities for self-directed deep learning are likely to be more engaged. (For example, the NSW Department of Education advocates for personalised learning pathways to improve engagement for Aboriginal students in schools.)

Rather than impose the Australian Curriculum (or its relatives) upon home educators, perhaps the Department of Education can better engage with home educators about why they do *not* choose to use the school system. The consultation paper in early 2022 was very limited, with abstract questions asked about the meaning of "high quality education." If there are specific concerns that affect a substantial proportion of home educated students, these could be addressed in consultation with the home education community over the coming months. It is unclear what benefit the proposed amendments would have for home educated students. Certainly, the proposed changes would substantially increase compliance costs for both families and the Department in terms of writing and reviewing plans/reports. Such an increase in compliance costs would not be in the best interests of the child.

*Personalised, deep, interest-led learning should be available to all students.*

There is little evidence that the Australian Curriculum is in the best interest of students. *Education is not learning.* With the knowledge now available about the psychology of learning (and the impact of motivation/engagement), along with current technologies, surely there is an opportunity for governments to fund research and development of innovative approaches to delivering better learning experiences for students? If schools could provide a more personalised learning environment, perhaps fewer families would believe that home education is a better option. Perhaps this may also address some of the root causes underlying other challenges in schools. There are a number of advantages that schools have compared to home education but, for our family at least, these do not outweigh the benefits of tailored and interest-based learning at home.

Ross & Dwyer (2021), in a review of the Australian Curriculum v9.0 revision, advised that “it’s more important for ministers and their advisors to ask themselves ‘does this curriculum bring students joy?’ For Australian kids, that is the most important question.”

Home-educating families sacrifice income and accept the responsibility of education in order to better meet the specific and evolving needs of their children. Making home education unnecessarily onerous on families could well lead to a greater proportion of “unregistered” students; such “policy resistance” would mean that the good intentions of the proposed amendments would be undermined. It could also lead to more children needing state-funded education which would place further strain on schools that are already coping with a number of challenges (e.g., student violence,<sup>2</sup> teacher shortages<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>2</sup> ["School principals faced with machetes, spears and knives as report reveals soaring classroom violence" \(ABC News, 22-Mar-2024\)](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-22/school-principals-face-violence-from-children-parents-students/103615570)

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-22/school-principals-face-violence-from-children-parents-students/103615570>

<sup>3</sup> ["Queensland teacher shortage sees students miss out on electives, class sizes double, says union" \(ABC News, 2-Feb-2024\)](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-02/qld-teacher-strike-education-union-student-classroom/103418590)

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