



9 Meade Street,
BULAHDELAH.
N.S.W. 2423

13th June, 2004.

The Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee,
Suite SG.52,
Parliament House
CANBERRA.
ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam,

Open Submission to the Student Income Support Inquiry

I wish to draw the plight of low income families whose sixteen plus year old children do not attend mass schooling institutions but are, instead, educated via the legal means of Home Education to your attention.

Firstly, as despite the rapid growth of Home Education in this country, there is a lack of media attention to same and many are unaware of this alternative to the en masse schooling of children, I am providing you with some of the reasons for this viable and increasingly popular education preference:

Many parents now make it their business to discover as much as they can about learning, education and the practice of mass schooling long before their children reach what society calls, "School age," and decide that it would be to their children's advantage not to attend school. Most of these parents rightly assert that because of their knowledge of these matters and their love of their children, their initial decision to home educate was not a matter of choice.

There are also many other parents who don't send their children to school and had no choice in their decision. Among these are parents who, from the time their children were babies, encouraged their instinctive love of music, singing, dancing, acting, art, reading, writing, history, mathematics and science and more. They also provided them with access to a wide vocabulary, general knowledge and information on hygiene and safety and helped them to develop sound moral values ... long before they reached 'school age' but believing that children have to go to school and that, at school, their delight in learning would continue to be encouraged and their existing knowledge would broaden and grow, sent them to State Government schools at around the age of five and have, due to abuses perpetrated upon their children within those schools, legally removed them to be educated in a nurturing family environment. Because they are no longer attending mass schooling institutions, these children, although being educated via an alternative which is legal throughout Australia, are stripped of the joint State and Federal funding previously made available for their education and their parents, often themselves suffering from post traumatic stress, attempt to repair appalling emotional and psychological damages.

Home Education is conducted according to the individual needs of the children involved. The method of learning which education experts consider to be the most effective is, in mass schooling terminology, called 'progressive learning' and it is this method, under the principal title of 'natural learning', by which many 'home' educated children, including mine, learn. And home educated children who study via use of natural learning techniques learn during every moment of their waking hours. However, despite this method's being regarded as the best way for children to learn, it is not put into practice in mass schooling institutions because, as education experts are also aware, it is both difficult and time consuming to document.

While many educating parents are affluent, many others are not and these include parents in receipt of support benefits. It is to the latter that I now draw your attention:-

The N.S.W. Government pays a \$50.00 per child per annum 'Back to School Allowance' which home educating families can receive. Unless there is a similar allowance of which I am unaware paid in other States or Territories, apart from this, home educators receive no government funding whatsoever towards their children's education. Low income home educators whose sole income is that of Supporting Parent's Benefits, Disability Support Benefits, Wife's Pensions and Family Tax Benefits, pay for their children's educational needs from these benefits.

As Full Family Tax Benefit Part A is drastically reduced – to a mere \$42.00 per fortnight – when children turn sixteen, low income parents in the above categories, whether or not home educating, find themselves in the position of needing to replace income formerly derived from FTB Part A with Youth Allowance as each of their children turn sixteen.

As you would be aware, pensions etc. are designed to provide for basic necessities only for the recipients only. The above, therefore, appears to be a governmental attempt to ensure, via financially punitive measures aimed at parents, that all children of low income families 'stay on at school' or enter the paid workforce so that they don't 'end up like' their economically and – it is assumed – 'socially' disadvantaged parents. For parents on benefits denial of Youth Allowance or long periods of waiting for same can cause frustration, anxiety, exhaustion and depression – and this can be to the point of feeling suicidal. As children and young adults who do not attend mass schooling institutions on a full time basis have Youth Allowance cancelled by Centrelink, this factor is not restricted to home educators. It is, however, clear that at the time of the inception of Youth Allowance, Home Education, although legal and practised by many at that time, was not taken into consideration.

Over six months ago the Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Hon. Dr. Brendan Nelson requested of the Minister for Family and Community Services, Senator the Hon. Kay Patterson, that 'the definition of "an approved registered body" is broadened so that eligible students educated in the home can receive the Youth Allowance'. Yet to date there remain major discrepancies in the manner in which individual Centrelink offices and individual Centrelink employees handle applications for Youth Allowance from home educated children, with some of these children being denied Youth Allowance and others, after what can be a very long wait during which countless telephone calls are made to Centrelink, a variety of conflicting responses are made by Centrelink employees and an appeal may have to be lodged, receiving Youth Allowance.

Despite Centrelink's having previously distributed Family Tax Benefit for children of those on benefits, when applying for Youth Allowance these children are subjected to Centrelink's mandatory requirement of 'proof of identity' documents sufficient to provide a total points value of one hundred. It is claimed by Centrelink employees that an Australian Birth Certificate, despite having a Centrelink allocated points value of seventy, is no longer regarded by Centrelink as being of any points value at all as it is a mandatory document. This, plus the fact that Centrelink's list of points value documents is adult orientated, leaves children and young adults whose families' incomes are well within Centrelink's means test requirements, those whose need for Youth Allowance is greatest and the home educated in particular, with insufficient documents to readily meet with Centrelink's one hundred points value total. In our own case, the purchase of a mobile telephone plan in my child's name, at a total cost of \$432.00 (being for a two year plan at \$18.00 per calendar month) was the only means by which Centrelink's one hundred points stipulation could be met. My second child's sixteenth birthday is less than eight months away. If the aforementioned situation and mobile telephone plan costs remain as they are to date, at that time I shall have to outlay \$36.00 per calendar month, with a total cost of \$864.00, for two unwanted and unused mobile telephones purchased for the sole purpose of providing Centrelink with 'proof of identity' documentation.

According to Centrelink: 'To qualify for Youth Allowance, a young person must meet age, residence and activity test requirements. A young person can satisfy the activity test as a full time student by providing details of approved study – an approved course at an approved institution at the minim required study load. If the young person is unable to meet the criteria for full time student status, then he or she is considered to be a jobseeker and can satisfy the activity test by participating in an approved activity.'

The Education Act decrees the minimum requirements for education and home educators are subject to this Act. The institution of Home Education is approved by Law; it follows that the wide variety of courses in which home educated children and young adults participate, together with their study load are also approved by Law; yet Centrelink, while treating children and young adults who attend mass schooling institutions on a full time basis as automatically meeting with Centrelink requirements, which requirements are not in keeping with those of the Education Act as they are over and above same, deems that home educated children, whose education is, through the very nature of Home Education, full time, as 'not meeting the criteria for full time student status' and those to whom Youth Allowance is allocated are treated in the same manner as are 'jobseekers'.

Currently, home educated children who receive Youth Allowance, like 'jobseekers', are required to sign and return to Centrelink on a fortnightly basis a form which treats all sixteen and seventeen year old children, and also young adults, as being likely to be having sexual relationships and as being of a character/leading a lifestyle which has the potential to cause them to be involved in rehabilitation programs/arrest/being gaoled. Additionally, under the headings, 'You must tell us if any of the things below happened in the period' and 'YOUTH ALLOWANCE ONLY' this form contains the sentence 'Your parent/guardian dies, separates, or re-partners' and thereby currently serves as a fortnightly reminder of their parents' mortality. While the latter may be considered by some as being inconsequential, for school traumatised home educated children in particular it is very unhealthy indeed.

Because home educated children in receipt of Youth Allowance are treated as 'jobseekers' by Centrelink, unlike children who are schooled en masse, they are compelled to provide Centrelink with a 'Participation Record' at three monthly intervals. This entails their having to provide Centrelink with a weekly list of not only the subjects they study and the minimum amount of time spent studying those subjects but also the subject matter of their studies:

- The amount of time this takes detracts from study time.
- In the case of school traumatised home educated children this is an emotionally and mentally damaging procedure.
- For home educated children who learn via progressive (or natural) learning techniques this task verges on the impossible.
- It is discriminatory.

The current Youth Allowance situation is both inequitable and oppressive towards Home Education and those who practise it but this could be rectified by:

- Broadening of 'the definition of "an approved registered body"' to include Home Education
and (as Family Tax Benefit is not paid to parents of children and young adults in receipt of Youth Allowance)
- Having Full Family Tax Benefit Part A remain constant, rather than being reduced when children turn sixteen.

Home Education provides children with the opportunity to commence specialisation in potential future careers based upon interest and ability, rather than age. For sixteen and seventeen year old children and for young adults who are already following paths towards careers in specialised fields being forced to participate in studies outside those required for their chosen careers for the purpose of obtaining Youth Allowance is detrimental to their elevation towards those careers. Denial of Youth Allowance in these cases and in those where subjects being studied are reliant upon part time tuition and many hours of private study on the basis that this does not constitute 'an approved course at an approved institution at the minim required study load' is destructive to these young people's career aspirations.

Sincerely,



Mrs. Adele Carrall.