***Parental Choice in Education – A Basic Human Right & Responsibility***

*by Bruce & Karen McNeice*

Hello- I'm Bruce McNeice – a former school principal, homeschool dad, and education consultant. My passion is to impart courage to parents, and to equip and support parents in their God-given role of teaching and training their children to reach their full potential, and to live an abundant life.

A Queensland Non-State School Report states:

*“The concept of home education challenges the idea that education occurs in an institution discreet from the home and that such an education should only be provided by specially trained professionals such as teachers. .... Any definition of schooling, to meet present challenges therefore has to comprehend a range of approaches to education, which may include the assembly of groups of children with an educational purpose outside a formal school and a possibility of an educational process taking place without a regular or constant assembly of students*” (Qld. Education Department, 1995, p.14 - 15).

Statistics from various sources show that the numbers of homeschooling families in Australia have shown steady growth over the last 40 years (Fogarty, 1995; Harding, 1995; Rasmussen, 1996; Hunter, 1997; Education Qld 2003, 2005; McNeice, 1995-2017; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991- 2014; English & Gribble, 2021).

In 2022, students who were registered with the government for independent home-education across Australia approached 30,000. This does not include students enrolled in schools of distance education, nor the many families who are what you might call ‘conscientious objectors’ and are homeschooling without registration (English & Gribble, 2021).

These families are choosing to 'go it alone' because they have strong convictions about the superior value of home-education; and rather than seeing choice-in-education as a government dispensation, they see it as a God-given right or a natural human right to teach their own children in their own way, without government monitoring.

Some years ago, the Victorian education authorities were forced to recognise parental preference for home-education with a ‘Victorian Equal Opportunity’ decision, and the Supreme Court of Victoria regarding the *‘Noontil versus Auty, Boyd & Edwards*’ case in which the families involved in a corporate learning centre were permitted to continue their educational program.

A Queensland Education Department document titled ‘Homeschooling Review Report’ also made the following analysis:

*“It [the Ed. Act 1989] was clearly designed to constrain the number of parents who choose to homeschool… The requirements have resulted in an unintentional consequence: the ever-growing (yet unknown) number of parents who homeschool outside of the current legislative and regulatory framework … and parents, in the absence of a supportive environment, are choosing in increasing numbers to operate outside the law. This they do with great reluctance as for all intents and purposes; they are otherwise law-abiding citizens.” (p. 21)*

The report predicted that without substantial changes to legislative policies and practices, *“…the cycle of suspicion and mistrust will continue for another generation.” (Qld Education Department 2003)*

Coming up to the present times, the recent situation of COVID mandates that seemed excessive to many citizens, when compared with the actual science and statistics on the effectiveness of these measures (Jacobs, 2021), has resulted in a large movement of parents taking their children out of the school system during 2021 and 2022. Observers (Magann 2021) reported that during December 2021, Facebook Homeschooling groups were receiving up to 1,000 new members each week. It is yet to be seen whether this will be an ongoing trend, but anecdotally, there does seem to be an ongoing and increasing mistrust of government agendas in the years following the Covid mandates.

During our interviews with home-education families all over Australia, virtually every family saw themselves as law-abiding citizens. However, many of these families would only be registered if they could be guaranteed the freedom and flexibility to use the resources and learning methods that best suit the needs of their family, and which do not compromise the philosophical, spiritual or cultural beliefs of the family. The concern is that if they seek approval to do home-education, then they will have to compromise their spiritual beliefs, cultural values, or educational philosophy (McNeice, ‘*Survey & Interviews*’, 1995 - 2017).

**The Role of Parents and Government in the Provision of Education:**

In a Qld, Non-State Schools Report (1995) and the Home-school Review Report (2003), the two main concerns of the government were outlined. On the one hand, the government recognises that the non-State sector (and parents in general), have a right to choose educational processes and curriculum that are...*"acceptable to parents because of the beliefs embedded within [them]"* (Qld Education Department, 1995, p.42). On the other hand, the government believes that it has an obligation to society to ensure that each child receives an appropriate education.

The stated concern is to find a balance between the right of the child to have an education, with the right of the parent to choose the education that best suits their children.

*“The home-schooling movement is characterised by parents taking the full responsibility for their children’s education instead of delegating that responsibility to another person or institution.” (Qld Education Department, 2003, p.6)*

In discussions with home-educating parents, we have generally found that they wish to take on the responsibility for educating their child, and at the same time wish to have some support to be equipped to do that job well.

Professional educators must acknowledge that they do not have an innate authority; but have merely been ‘delegated’ some authority by the parent.

At ‘Homeward Education Support’, we aim to work in partnership with parents, equipping them in their role as their children’s primary educator.

During the last twenty-eight years of serving home-education families, many parents have come to us after experiencing negative or intimidating contact from school officials or government officials. In the majority of cases, we have been able to assist these parents to put out the fires and resolve the particular legal issues at hand, before they could escalate.

 **Doing your best:**

Although most home-educators are doing an amazing job, we do come across lazy parents who don't provide a high-quality education for their children; parents who just accept that their children have an aversion to writing, mathematics, or to applying themselves to deeper level thinking and learning. These parents cast a shadow on the rest of the home-education community. This is not the norm, but we have seen a very small number of children grow up to deeply resent their parents for their educational neglect.

So, let us be diligent to train our children well, and let their progress (spiritually, morally & academically) be a testimony to all.

**Utilising Our Support Services:**

Some families enrol with the Homeward Education Program to have a degree of accountability and support.

‘Homeward Education Support’ is for those who wish to take on the full responsibility of the education of their children; and yet still want a set curriculum that is thorough yet easy to personalise, while having access to supportive advice, encouragement and equipping. Homeward offers a non-accredited home-education membership that is not bound to, or influenced by government funding.

The ‘Homeward’ education program continues to be further developed in consultation with parents, and can be individualised according to student needs and family values, while working towards graduation awards for a pathway to careers and university entrance.