



Sarah Nicholson home schools her son from their Myrniong residence. Photo – Helen Tatchell

# Learning from home

By Kate Taylor

A local group is smashing misconceptions about the practice of home schooling.

When Sarah Nicholson's son began turning into a bully at school, she knew it was time to take action – so she pulled him out of mainstream education, and started home schooling.

"He was spending lunch and recess alone in the sand pit – he wasn't socialising, and he wasn't making friends, he wasn't getting what he really needed," Ms Nicholson explained.

He was also being bullied, and he was reciprocating that behaviour because it was what he was being exposed to."

Her son didn't, however, turn into an isolated child with zero social skills as portrayed widely in social commentary on home schooling.

"Oh for goodness sake. If you start investigating what groups you want to join, there's actually the potential for you to never be home. There's at least 40 families on our facebook group, and we're part of the Ballarat group too, and we have fortnightly and weekly activities."

A former teacher herself, the Myrniong mother of two set about involving herself and her son in the socially active world of home ed, often with more educational opportunities than mainstream schools can offer.

"There's a farm and gardening group in Ballarat, we do soccer, we do library lessons with a group, there's robotics classes, a dance class, ballet, book clubs doing author studies and genre studies, there are groups that go

into aged care places, and also music classes...

"And excursions. They have to be the biggest thing we do, they are fun and they bring learning to life for children - we do two or three a term as a group, and our family are constantly at the zoo doing science and geography, basing our home curriculum around our zoo membership; the education opportunities with home schooling are limitless."

But regulations and guidelines proposed by the state government are set to impact home schooling, potentially making it inaccessible for the parents and children who need it.

"The regulations are vague, and they're being made to sound so benign by Education Minister James Merlino - the guidelines are specific - but guidelines can be changed any time and made even more difficult, so we're very concerned that the regulations themselves be specific to our needs. And home educators don't like the new rules, we weren't consulted about them."

In particular, parents would have to wait 28 days to be registered for homeschooling, complete a year learning plan to submit to the authority, and the authority may deny approval; the child would not be allowed to be taken out of school until registration is obtained or parents can be fined for truancy. Applications will take longer than 28 days to process if a re-application is required, and there is a new cut-off date of 30 November in the year prior to the school year. There are also new rules about reviews to continue registration.

"Currently, under Victorian reg-

ulations you may withdraw your child at any stage of the school year - you only need to notify the school and the government body who oversees home schooling, which means that it's entirely up to the parent to make a decision about what's best for their child.

"They want to have the power to say whether or not they think a parent is going to be capable of educating that child or not. I've never seen an example of where a parent has failed to educate the child. I don't know where the cases are that they're worrying about.

"And a parent may not know by the 30th of November the previous year that they want to do home education the following year. It doesn't allow for families like mine, who put our son in school and found that it didn't fit... we didn't know that on No-

vember 30 the previous year.

"And in a case of bullying of any sort, waiting 28 days is detrimental to the child.

"Also, there's no support offered for parents in preparing the plan, and we have no idea who will be approving the registrations, will they understand how home ed works and will they know our child's needs better than us..?"

"The draft is full of very unreasonable and unrealistic expectations. We feel it's a bit of an attack on us, actually."

Submissions close on Tuesday 28 February, and can be sent to Education and Training Reform Regulations Review, Attn: Strategic Policy Division, Department of Education and Training, GPO Box 4367 MELBOURNE 3001 or emailed to [det.regulation.review@edumail.vic.gov.au](mailto:det.regulation.review@edumail.vic.gov.au)

## Parents have right to choose

Member for Western Victoria Josh Morris shares the home schoolers' concerns about the proposed changes. Having met with Ms Nicholson to discuss the issue, Mr Morris said that the changes seem somewhat under-handed.

"Daniel Andrews has failed to consult with the thousands of parents who choose to home school their children before announcing these changes," Mr Morris said.

"There was no prior indication that regulatory changes to home schooling would be made, and the Government has not been forthcoming with a reason for instituting these changes."

He said that more concerning for parents and educators is that the Andrews Labor Government has tried to escape scrutiny by announcing these changes during the Christmas school holidays.

"The Liberal Party believes in a parent's right to choose the appropriate educational setting for their children, which includes home schooling."