

Background

It's important to remember that we have a shared goal: happy, healthy children with a deep love of learning. In that spirit I'm going to pretend we are sitting together drinking a coffee and having a conversation about homeschooling. It would have been great to have this conversation before the proposal was drafted but ok, here we are.

Here is a homeschooler's answers to the questions that could have been asked earlier to avoid faulty assumptions:

1. *Is there a primary educator?*

No.

I was homeschooled. My mother quit her school-teaching job to focus on my education, make of that what you will. She emphasised that in a homeschool environment there is no such thing as a teacher; there is only a steward of learning. Many years later one of my best university professors said the same thing.

2. *What is a steward of learning?*

A person who pays careful attention to what the child *may* become interested in, using that knowledge to plant seeds that can grow into passions. A steward of learning offers experiences to a child to see what might spark an interest.

My mother was easily able to help me learn to read when she saw that I was interested in books and by six years old I was reading at a high school level. Not because I am particularly bright, but because I was benefitting from the complete attention of an adult who was dedicated to feeding my interests. And when her own knowledge stopped, the steward part came in...

She (and that university professor) never saw it as their job to 'teach' me per se. Their goal wasn't necessarily to *give* me knowledge, their goal was to give me the tools to *find* knowledge.

- When I was interested in machines my mother introduced me to a mechanic
- When I wondered about the stars an astronomer showed me how telescopes work
- When I didn't understand why some rhymes sounded strange a librarian helped me find books on the structure of poetry
- My mother also introduced me to thousands of other people and topics but I only remember the interesting ones. That's the way of it isn't it, we only remember the things that sparked our interest.

A homeschooled child doesn't have a teacher, they have attentive people who connect the child with specialised knowledge, from cookery to quantum physics to Scout Clubs to Youtubers.

3. *Where did you have your classes and how is a homeschool curriculum designed?*

Learning happens everywhere, it's impossible to avoid. Our son began to learn multiplication, addition and strategy by playing Yahtzee in cafés waiting for trains. He learned basic division by converting between currencies in the countries we've travelled to or lived in. He learned how to read when he realised that the squiggles on a page were symbols of meaning and so my husband spent uncountable hours feeding our child's love of books, flash cards, and word games.

In this way, the curriculum isn't designed, it happens organically. Certainly there are some homeschoolers who follow a curriculum or - more often - pieces of many curricula. However the foundation of all homeschool philosophies is the ability to pivot at any moment, diving into whatever is interesting at the time.

It is almost impossible to create a curriculum for a homeschooled child at the beginning of each year *then stick to it*. A closely-followed yearly lesson plan can, of course, be created (and in a classroom with many children it makes a lot of sense to do so) but an individual family will stick to a yearly lesson plan purely to fulfill a bureaucratic function, with no regard for the child. This approach seems to be the opposite of our shared goal.

4. *Aren't you worried that homeschooled kids will fall through the cracks?*

Less so than the mainstream-school kids who fall through the cracks. The demographics, motivation, and outcomes of homeschooling families are well-documented. Of all educational streams, voluntary homeschool (not including involuntary situations like thuisverblijfers) is the least likely to produce educationally-neglected children.

5. *Would it help to have "specially trained inspectors" to make sure they don't fall through the cracks?*

Trained to do what, precisely? Trained by whom? What does that training involve? Considering that this would be an entirely new professional field in this country you'll forgive me for feeling uncomfortable about being forced to participate in someone else's learning experience. I'm busy enough helping my child to learn, I don't feel like doing that for an inspector.

So, that's the background. Let's move on to the questions:

1. Obligations but no benefits

Schools have financial resources, health checks, paid visiting speakers etc. I'm wondering why homeschoolers are being offered none of the benefits before being burdened with the proposed educational criteria? For instance, I'd be delighted to be offered a learning bundle on the bicycle-riding safety test offered in schools. I'd be thrilled to be given a yearly budget for educational resources and field trips (the budget wouldn't need to be anywhere near the amount of money we are saving our local school by not enrolling our son, 50% would be ample).

And if anyone would like to send a wellness nurse to our home to check my child's hearing, eyesight, and growth, please feel free. We arrange these kinds of wellbeing checks ourselves, among many other things, and this illustrates the systemic isolation of homeschoolers that will not be relieved by these proposals.

2. All or nothing

These proposals are well-meaning but seem to be based on the flawed assumption that homeschoolers want nothing to do with mainstream education. In some cases this may be true, but we never know if we don't ask, right? Have the people responsible for these proposals asked themselves (or asked any homeschoolers) what the barriers may be between homeschoolers and local schools?

A couple of discussion points:

- Flexi-schooling is common in many countries. This is a combination of homeschooling and school attendance, with parents and teachers working closely together to produce the best outcome for the child. Flexi-schooling is the opposite of the current All In Or All Out approach to school attendance enshrined in the 5b clause that is clearly unrealistic and unworkable, as mentioned in more than one response to this proposal. Has this All In/All Out approach been questioned, and if so, what was the outcome? In what way can opportunities be offered to families whose children are currently in school but would like to explore homeschooling? In what way can opportunities be offered to homeschooling families who feel that their child may benefit from part-time school attendance?
- Following on from the above point, the mandated yearly number of school-attendance hours is deeply problematic for many homeschooling families, either through circumstance or through philosophy. Has this number been questioned, especially in light of the recent Covid-related school closures? Are there possible alternatives that could create a more open and harmonious relationship between homeschoolers and schools?
- Some children may need a year or two of homeschooling in the middle of their school career. Others may thrive with a few years of homeschooling before enrolling in a school. Some may attend school for a year or two only for their parents to realise that school is not the right place for their child. I call upon you to put homeschooling in its correct place; a valid stream of education that can work with, or instead of, school.

3. Dutch-language requirement of the primary educator

Two glaring problems:

- a) The incorrect assumption that a homeschooled child has only one 'teacher' (see Background Point 1)
- b) The implication of the language test is that the child must be 'taught' primarily in Dutch.

Given the heavy emphasis on multilingualism in this country, the Dutch-language requirement is puzzling.

Xenophobia is a big word but may well be used if this requirement is mandated: Will English be an acceptable language for homeschoolers while Arabic, Farsi, or Swahili may not be?

Presumably we may speak our native languages with our children between the ages of 0 - 5. Then what? We switch to non-native Dutch with our child on weekdays between 09:00 and 15:30? How old will my child be when we can once again use English as part of a 'school day'? Will it 11 years old or thereabouts to replicate the age at which a Dutch student begins to use English in school?

Will International Schools also be mandated to stop teaching in English/French/German/Spanish, or is this implied rule only to be applied to homeschoolers?

4. Location of Education and content of an inspection

- How does the home-visit requirement affect homeless families, families in shelters, or nomadic families?
- Will the inspectors be comfortable getting on a plane to meet us wherever we happen to be educating at that moment? (And yes, despite the background to this proposal, we are free to include travel as part of our child's education).
- What happens if we are not home on that day? Or any other day that suits the inspectors?
- Is it acceptable to have a meeting in my front yard? In the street outside my house? At a cafe nearby? At the park, or the swimming pool, or any of the other hundred places where education happens?
- Is my child required to attend? And if I refuse to put them in that stressful position, what happens next?
- Exactly what metrics will be used for the assessment? How will these metrics be developed, and by whom?

- Is the assessment even reliant on metrics or will it depend on the individual inspector's 'gut feeling'? How big a role will unconscious bias play?
- Do school inspectors also visit the homes of professional school teachers or is this considered an unacceptable invasion of privacy? How will those blurred boundaries be reconciled?

5. If a family 'fails the test'

- For how long will the child be forced to attend school? At what point will that begin (immediately after the assessment, during the appeal, some other undefined point in time)?
- How exactly will the child be forced to go to school? Physically dragged from the home? And if the child gets up and walks out of school twenty times a day, who will drag them back?
- What does an appeal process look like, who will oversee it, how quickly will it be resolved? And what resources will a family have to pour into the appeals process? If the family is successful in the appeal who will compensate for the stress, the lost time, and the lost money? What would that compensation look like?

6. If a child is forced to go to school

- and there is emotional and/or psychological trauma as a result, who will be accountable and in what way? Emotional violence against children is illegal in this country, as I'm sure you know, so what safeguards will be in place to prevent that?
- What guarantees are in place that the school is a good fit (almost impossible given the very nature of the 5b clause)? If the only school that is a close-enough fit has no places, how will this be handled? Will overcrowded classrooms be forced to become more overcrowded? How will the current teacher shortfall be filled?
- Will the parents be responsible for overseeing the homework imposed on the child by the school, completely ignoring the learning rhythm and years of trust built up between parents & children, and can you see how destructive that would be to a family bond?

We have obeyed the laws and fulfilled the requirements, often significantly changing our lifestyles in order to facilitate homeschooling our Dutch child in his own country. While we could migrate to the country of my birth where homeschooling is normal, integrated, and collaborative, I would prefer to remain here in my adopted country and help improve the relationship between school-based learning and community-based learning, also known as homeschool.

If the desired outcome of this process is to ensure the health and happiness of our children, and I trust that it is, let's get together and talk about how to do that. There is a vast amount of experience and knowledge available among the homeschooling families and organisations in this country. Please draw upon it to know more about what a homeschooled person looks like, for a better understanding of homeschooling in general, and to know what homeschooling families need from you to be well-supported in their child's learning experience.