



## Parliamentary debate on home education: May 13th 2003

*Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge):*

I am most grateful for the opportunity to have this debate and to my constituent Fiona Berry, who first brought home education to my attention. Like the vast majority of people in the country, I was rather ignorant of home education, not to say slightly prejudiced about it.

In any free society, the freedom to choose the type of education that we want for our children is essential. Although there is much talk about the dangers of social exclusion, it is easy to see that a state system that insisted on total inclusion would not be free. We can be proud that that freedom was enshrined in our law long before the UN decided that it was an essential, in the convention on the rights of the child. We can also be proud that the number of families who have chosen to home educate in England has been growing for the past 30 years.

It may surprise hon. Members, as it surprised me, to learn that there is no such thing as a compulsory school age, despite the passion of the Department for Education and Skills for that phrase. The Education Act 1944 calls on all parents to ensure that their children are educated, but they are free to decide whether that should be at school or otherwise. Roughly 1 per cent. Of the children in education in England and Wales are educated at home by their parents, whose reasons for doing so are as diverse as their families. Although the percentage is small, it represents a significant number of young people. I do not believe that there are accurate figures for the number of home-educating families in England and Wales. That lack of firm information perhaps reflects the free society in which we live. Parents are under no obligation to register with anyone or to notify the local education authority, as long as they continue to fulfil their obligations under section 7 of the 1944 Act to educate their children in a way that suits their ability, age and aptitude, by attendance at school or otherwise. The best guesses put the number of families that are currently home educating at 25,000 and the number of children who are being educated at home at 150,000.

One might ask why anyone would wish to home educate when a free state education system is available to all. There are as many answers to that question as there are families home educating. Some decided from the beginning that they preferred to continue to allow their children to learn in the natural way that they did in their pre-school years. Others began to home educate after withdrawing their children from school, perhaps because of bullying or school refusal, or sometimes because the child was over-stretched or even bored by the academic work. Some parents begin home education confident that they are making the best possible choice for their child, while others agonise over their abilities, but consider that they have no other option.

Despite the concerns of professional educators about the capabilities of home-educating parents, research indicates that it is hard to get it wrong. Whether parents use the national curriculum or no curriculum at all, whether they use formal methods or allow their children autonomy, whether children learn to read early or late, home-educated children outperform school children in studies that have been done in England, the United States and Canada. Recent research has shown that the brain is aggressive and that children are natural learners. They are born wanting to learn. What surprises home educators is that in an information-rich culture our educational institutions sometimes manage to block that basic desire to learn successfully.



Home education offers many benefits for the families who do it. Learning becomes an integral part of everything, and takes place anywhere at anytime, not in special places at specific times. Once the compulsion is removed, children do not regard learning as work, but as a natural part of their lives. Children who are not segregated from their parents can become involved in their communities. Many families contribute significant amounts of time and energy to local projects.

The critics of home education sometimes refer to potential problems with socialisation, but research at the University of Michigan showed that home-educated children had no such problem. Perhaps that is because home-educating families take their children with them, and involve them in many social situations. Those children are, therefore, able to mix with people of all ages, and do not discriminate on the basis of age. In 2001, the Fraser Institute produced a comprehensive report into home education in the US and Canada. That report includes Professor Thomas Smedley's conclusion that:

"home-schooled students are more mature and better socialised than those who are sent to either public or private schools."

The term "public or private schools" is used in the American sense.

Given those facts, it is rather strange that officialdom often lumps home-educated children into the same category as excluded or truanting children, or those in the care of the local authority. Assumptions are made about their behaviour, on the basis that children not in school are all the same. Home-educating families would maintain that their commitment to education and to the strength of their families, and their sense of social responsibility mean that officialdom has an uninformed way of thinking about electively home-educated children. The Fraser Institute report into home education in the US and Canada, where roughly 2.5 per cent. Of children are home educated, concluded that home education provided a better education at a fraction of the cost of state education. The cost of home education is generally borne by the parents in the US, as is the case here. The report shows that those children outperformed schoolchildren, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

Dr. Paula Rothermel's study in England also showed that all children benefited from home education. Her report concluded that the children who did best were those from the lowest socio-economic group—turning the usual outcome of mainstream schools on its head. These days, parents are encouraged to respect their child's natural development in the early years. One advantage of home education is that it allows development to progress at a child's own pace, and ignores any notions of the average, or of targets. Some home-educated children learn to read at four. Many more learn later, sometimes as late as 10 or 11. One study showed that, by the age of 13, it was impossible to distinguish the age at which a child had learned to read. Indeed, a delay in the beginning of reading sometimes may have positive advantages, as the incidence of dyslexia and other problems is very much reduced among children who have been taught by autonomous methods.

A wide range of approaches may be adopted, ranging from running a school at home, with lessons and timetables, to topic-led studying, which takes a single subject as far as possible, to completely child-led, free-form methods, and every style in between. The education provided can be tailored to each child and each family, and take account of their talents and challenges.

For children who have been withdrawn from school due to bullying, or school refusal—something that many Members of Parliament come across in their weekly surgeries—the removal of any compulsion to attend is often all that is needed to solve the problem. Thus, it



is rather astonishing and dismaying to know that many parents of extremely unhappy children remain in ignorance about their legal rights to provide home education. In some cases, parents have willingly gone to jail, rather than send a school-phobic child to school. It seems outrageous that—despite months of meetings and discussions with officials—in many cases, parents are not even informed about the option to deregister their child and home educate. In some cases, schools and education officials have encouraged parents to return children who are almost suicidal to school, rather than offer the information that home education is a legal alternative.

That misinformation extends from the constant repetition of the phrase that I mentioned at the beginning of my contribution, "compulsory school age", to legally incorrect information sent out with child benefit uprating letters. When home educators protested that it was not true that every parent had a legal duty to ensure that their children went to school, hurt disbelief that any home educator would so misunderstand the message of the leaflet was apparent in the apologies received from the Department. The problem was not that home educators would mistakenly rush to enrol their children in schools, nor that they would live in fear of arrest. The problem was that many parents who might one day need to know that home education was a legal and viable option were prevented from learning about it by a deliberate lie.

Those words may seem harsh, but, as reported in *The Sunday Times*, many home educators protested in autumn 2002 about the proposed wording of the leaflet. However, the same wrongly worded leaflet is still being sent out, so it seems that the misinformation must be deliberate. It is little wonder that the home-educated community has become officially invisible, subsumed as it is within a motley collection of exclusions and truants; it is being treated as if it belongs in the same category as the socially excluded and those totally disengaged from education.

In many cases, a lack of real information or knowledge about home education has resulted in the Government's not considering the impact of mainstream policies on home educators. Truancy patrols have been most entertaining in that respect, asking to see non-existent registration cards, or proof of home education that is impossible to produce. It is curious that home educators should see a vast amount of money expended on trying to herd school children back to school instead of on improvements in the attractiveness and desirability of the education on offer.

Another effect of mainstream policies—I hope that it is unintended—is that although the Government are avidly committed to keeping young people in learning, it appears that they are systematically denying the same access to those who are educated at home. In the past, home-educated children and young people could study for and obtain GCSE examinations as external candidates. They would incur the same cost as other children entered for exams externally—about £30 a subject. However, as the number of marks awarded for coursework has increased, the examination boards have become more reluctant to trust parents to supervise study for the exams.

Some families were able to get around that problem by studying for international GCSEs, but from June 2003 that avenue will no longer be open to home-educated students in the United Kingdom. The only options remaining for many parents are to employ supervising tutors, to spend a lot of money on GCSE correspondence courses at between £200 and £300 a subject, or to obtain places at colleges of further education for children under the age of 16.



We readily understand that many home-educated families exist on lower incomes because of the need for one parent to stay at home. The families do not complain about that because it is their free choice. However, it seems extremely unfair that, having made those financial sacrifices to facilitate their children's education, parents should find themselves discriminated against when trying to gain access to college courses.

Some parents who have applied for places at colleges for their children to study GCSEs or vocational courses have been told that places are available at bargain rates for senior citizens and the unemployed and that they are free for children over 16 who meet the entry requirements, but that a charge of £1,800 per subject is made for home educated children under 16. However, some parents, who were nevertheless ready and willing to pay that £1,800 per subject, have been told that a college can accept only LA money for children under 16.

As for many things in today's world, a postcode lottery is in operation; parents in some areas find it easier to get places and funding for colleges courses, while others find it impossible. It is rarely possible to obtain LA funding for home-educated children, and LAs often state that they receive no funding for those children whose parents have chosen to home educate. The funding guidance for further education is not so sure, however, stating that LAs receive funding for children educated otherwise. Perhaps there is some confusion between children educated electively by their parents and children educated otherwise by the LA. It would be good to know.

The same document explains that the Learning and Skills Council may, in rare cases, provide funding for courses for learners of compulsory school age—there is that phrase again—but the guidance goes on to say that

"the Secretary of State would expect the Council to exercise its power . . . only in exceptional circumstances"

and that the figures do not allow for any general expansion in the number of learners under 16."

That seems odd. It is almost as though our education system prefers home-educated children to slow down or give up on studying before reaching the magical age of 16, even if they are ready and willing to apply themselves to obtaining qualifications. Some families thus find that a college will say that no places are available to home-educated children under 16, while maintaining blocks of places for allocation to young people who have been permanently excluded for serious misbehaviour.

It is odd that kicking one's headmaster might gain one a free college place at 14, but studying hard at home for 10 years does not, and it is strange that a Government who, rightly, promote the value of, and access to, lifelong learning, and put considerable resources into keeping young people in learning should deny such things to a community that values education so highly.

I know that home educators do not ask for special consideration; they are certainly not asking for large resources to be assigned to counting and controlling. The Fraser Institute report for Canada and the United States, where it was possible to contrast results in strictly regulated states with those in unregulated ones, concluded that spending money on regulation made no difference to the level of achievement of home-educated children; they performed at the 85th centile, compared with the 50th centile for schooled children.



All that home educators want is for the Government to acknowledge that the law makes education, not school, compulsory; for accurate information about home education to be given freely to all parents; and for access to GCSEs and facilities in colleges to be available to home-educated children as they are to others in our country.

We are in a new millennium; the information age is upon us. Lifelong learning is not just a possibility but an essential tool for survival in a society in which frequent job changes will be the norm. Home educators are leading the way, preparing their children for a future in which learning is a continuing part of their lives. Home education is not for everyone; the mainstream education system is there for all. However, I should like the result of this debate to be that the issues have been aired, the Minister has heard them and home educators are able to compete on an even playing field.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis):

I congratulate the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) on having secured the debate. It is a good opportunity to shine a light on an issue that does not receive enough attention and to demonstrate—

Sitting Suspended for a Division in the House.

Mr. Lewis : I was congratulating the hon. Member for Uxbridge on securing a debate on such an important issue; we need to focus more on the issue than we have done in the past. I shall try to respond to his points constructively. If he wishes to ask further questions, I shall be happy to answer those later.

The basic position on home education in England can be summarised in a phrase; education is compulsory, schooling is not. That links into the hon. Gentleman's comments about the leaflet. When we realised that the wording could cause confusion, we clarified the matter and reprinted the leaflet. However, some old copies might still be in circulation.

As the Minister responsible for behaviour and discipline in schools, I would not want any attempt to be made to undermine the message on truancy. It is a serious problem; too many parents actively collude and are involved in their children's truancy. The Government make no apology for being determined to stamp down on that. Truancy contributes to educational underperformance and has a direct bearing on street crime. I hope that there is a political consensus on the fact that truancy is bad; it undermines our objectives for education.

Mr. Randall : Of course there is consensus. The problem is that the home educators whom I have met would be the last people to be considered irresponsible. They find the way in which they are included in the same breath as truancy rather upsetting.

Mr. Lewis : This is an opportunity to clarify a simple point. Children who are enrolled on a school register are expected to be there unless they have authorised absence. If they are not there, that is truancy and we expect parents to co-operate with the system on that. Clearly, if the child is being educated at home according to the law—properly and in accordance with the basic standards—that is perfectly lawful. We do not see that as truancy and there is no ambiguity or confusion about that. I am sorry if parents sometimes feel that the language is a little unclear, and we shall endeavour to do whatever we can to clarify it and put an end to any ambiguities in that regard.



It is the state's responsibility to provide for the education of children in schools. As an Education Minister, it is my belief that, for most pupils in most circumstances, school is the right place in which to receive an education. However, it is a fundamental right for parents to be free to educate their child at home if they so wish. As the hon. Gentleman has said, parents chose to home educate for various reasons. They might include religious, cultural or philosophical beliefs or the parents might simply take the view that home education works best for their children. Most of those children have never attended schools, so are never registered with the LAs because there is no requirement for them to be. The hon. Gentleman made that point.

We accept that sometimes a decision to home educate might be prompted by particular circumstances or problems that arise during the course of a young person's school experience. A child might develop medical problems, or become school-phobic, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I acknowledge that, in some cases, issues such as distance, access to local schools, dissatisfaction with the general education system or with an individual establishment, or bullying may be factors that lead a parent to choose home education. In all such circumstances, that should be a source of regret and a message to people at local and national level to take action. We do not want the school system to be such that a parent feels that they have no alternative but to remove their child from it. In the end, that represents a serious failure of the system.

This Government are doing a variety of things to address such concerns. We are providing learning mentors to help young people remove barriers to learning, and Connexions personal advisers to advise and guide young people and maintain their engagement. The new behaviour and education support teams bring together a wider range of child specialists to help children and families deal with problems. Our reform of the secondary curriculum, which seeks to introduce a more individualised learning experience for young people, is also important. The new modernised teaching profession that has been created is better engaged to manage behaviour and has more time to teach and to provide children and young people with the support and help that they need.

We recognise the need to reform the education system to minimise the number of children for whom being in a school environment is a negative experience. We recognise, too, that a whole variety of factors can contribute to that, including making the curriculum more relevant, reforming the teaching profession, using external advisers and improving relationships between what is happening at school and at home. Through such means, we are determined to make school as positive and attractive as possible for young people and their parents. That is absolutely integral to our overall policy priority of reducing the number of young people who drop out of education at the age of 16 in this country. That is still a major problem and often happens because young people get turned off education far too early in their educational lives.

Turning to the legal situation, local authorities have a general responsibility to ensure that they make suitable provision for education in their area, although parents who educate at home are not required by law to be registered in any way, a point that the hon. Gentleman has made.

We welcome the fact—the hon. Gentleman should also welcome it—that local authorities can intervene if they have reason to believe that parents are not providing a suitable education. They also have the right to make reasonable inquiries to ensure that children withdrawn from school to be home educated are receiving what is deemed an appropriate education. It is right that they should continue to have that power.



Of course, local arrangements vary. Many local authorities contact home-educated pupils as soon as such pupils start to be educated at home and continue to contact them annually. LAs do not have the legal right to enter a home or physically see a child, but it is the parent's responsibility to ensure that enough evidence is submitted to the LA to satisfy it that the child is receiving a suitable education. Parents may choose to meet an LA officer at home or at neutral location; that is roughly the right balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents and the state.

LAs may decide to contact home-educated children or their parents more regularly if they are not fully satisfied that the child is receiving a suitable education.

It is a question of balancing the right to freedom and individual choice with the state's responsibility and duty to ensure that an appropriate education is being secured. There are some circumstances in which an LA may provide home tuition for pupils who cannot attend school because of, for example, sickness, exclusion, school phobia or teenage pregnancy. Education is provided through home tutors and e-learning. E-learning allows schooling to be available through virtual communities and can be established in homes or in groups in libraries. We know that some of those projects can lead to children attaining significant national vocational qualifications.

LAs can pay directly for home tuition and the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that the Department is providing some support for a project, [notschool.net](http://notschool.net), that offers an IT-based education for disaffected children. The cost of the system amounts to £3,000 per year per pupil, which is broadly equivalent to the pupil cost in a mainstream school.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that LAs have no legal duty to provide financial support for parents who home educate. Some LAs provide free national curriculum materials or other forms of support to home-educating parents. That decision must continue to be made locally, so that any support fits with both the policies of individual LAs and the needs of each child.

I will examine the hon. Gentleman's point about access by young people, particularly under-16s, to further education. The playing field should not be uneven and we should examine whether the system disadvantages young people who could benefit from placements in colleges in the further education system.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of numbers. Because not all home-educated children are registered with an LA, we do not have firm figures on how many of them there are. However, some groups that work with parents of home educated-children have suggested that the number is between 50,000 and 100,000, and they claim that numbers are increasing.

Education provided at home must be efficient and appropriate to the age, ability and aptitude of the child. We accept and understand that parents adopt a wide variety of legitimate approaches. They have significant flexibility; for example, they are not required to teach the national curriculum or to have a timetable. Many parents who opt to home educate speak enthusiastically about the benefits that it provides. They cite the independence, the maturity and the keenness to learn that it can foster and the opportunity it provides for children to develop at a pace that suits them. As I said earlier, we respect their views. Other parents point to the high grades that some home-educated children achieve when they enter formal examinations. However, it is important to make this point; there has not been any independent and systematic evaluation at a national level of the overall quality of the education provided and the specific outcomes that it delivers for the children concerned.



My Department recognises and respects the right to choose to home educate. The circumstances of families and the needs of individual children will always vary and home education provides a route for parents to tailor and more directly to guide their children's learning, where they are particularly keen to do so. However, I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the learning potential and the welfare of the child must remain paramount. Positive relationships and mutual respect between the local authorities and the parents concerned are the best way to secure that aim, which we actively seek to encourage through our guidance and contacts with local authorities and parents.

The Government believe that we must recognise the right to choose home education. For example, my Department provides general guidance on home education and parents' legal responsibilities on its website. The guidance also provides links to other useful information, including the national curriculum and assessment arrangements, and enables access to websites created by home educators. There is no question about the Government being negative or trying to impede home educators, whose contribution we value.

The matter is sensitive and there are many differences of view, but the main thing is the best interest of children. We need to pay more attention to the contribution that home educators make.

It being nine minutes to Five o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.