

The Journal of Home Education

This article first appeared in the
Journal of Home Education



GCSEs for Home Educated Children in Dudley LA

by Joy Beasley

Until quite recently I was the Education Otherwise Local Contact for the Dudley (and for part of the time) the wider West Midlands area. Although I have now resigned from this post, I continue to speak to many home educators, both those new to the task and those who have been educating their children at home for some time. One constant concern over the years, especially for those with older children has been the question of what to do about GCSEs.

As a Local Contact and an experienced home educator I have always pointed out to parents that GCSEs are most definitely not compulsory, and that if their child isn't interested or they don't wish to work towards formal examinations or perhaps wish to bypass GCSEs altogether in favour of alternative qualifications, that is absolutely fine. However, there have always been a number of families where the young people were keen to do these examinations.

Some young people have been able to get places at a local college pre-16 but here in the Dudley area this has usually meant attending evening classes rather than daytime college, costs can be quite heavy and getting a place is difficult. For many families Correspondence Courses have provided the answer. However, parents have frequently raised with me their concerns about the financial outlay involved, particularly if a young person is interested in doing several subjects or indeed there are several children, close in age, within the family. By virtue of the fact that these are home educating families most are dependant on a single salary. They do not begrudge contributing towards their child's education but at £300 or more per subject, it can be very difficult for families to do. The only alternative has then been to wait until the young person reaches the age of 16 and enrol at college. Whilst this option does not incur high costs, it does mean that the young person is one or two years behind their peer group before taking the exams.

At a meeting in 2005, Tom Burwood, the School Development Adviser for Dudley LEA asked me what I felt would help the home educators in our area most. One of the subjects I raised was this question of GCSEs. He agreed to look into the situation and see if there was anything which could be done to help. Tom was at that point relatively new to his post as Adviser and very keen to develop an in-depth understanding of home education and to build good relationships with home educators in the area.

Tom researched the subject with local home educators and gathered sufficient information to present a case for enabling home educated young people to have access to at least some GCSEs at low or no cost. Dudley LEA had already been making significant changes in the way they contacted home educated families, in their written documentation and in information leaflets in an effort to move from a 'monitoring' role, to one of a two way relationship, where they were able to offer help and advice should families need it. This then culminated in Tom Burwood being able to

inform home educators early last year that he had been able to gain funding to provide classes in GCSE Maths and English (Language and Literature). These classes were to be entirely voluntary for those who expressed an interest in attending.

The classes now run one morning per week at Saltwells Education Centre. The young people receive some teaching and then continue to work at home with their parents during the rest of the week. The thorny problem of course work is also covered, which as many home educators know is often an issue when taking the exams outside of an educational establishment. The young people have set up an email support group and Tom and his colleague are available during the week to give any advice or assistance via telephone or email. The class opened with perhaps 15 youngsters aged between 10 and 15, but numbers have grown and at the most recent class over 20 were present. Families are not charged for the classes and the young people are provided with text books, learning materials and their exam fees will be paid under the scheme.

The classes are proving very popular with the young people who all work hard but enjoy a more relaxed approach to learning than they would perhaps experience at school. Not all of them will be taking their exams at the same time but the classes are flexible enough to allow for this. Some parents choose to stay either just to help their own child or to be an 'extra pair of hands' generally and it is clear to see that a great deal of mutual respect has built between parents, children and tutors.

On a recent news programme I saw how the Government now wishes to introduce 'individual learning plans'. It seems to me that Dudley Education Authority is at the forefront of such a scheme. They have looked at the needs of home educated children and been able to integrate these into their general education provision for young people in the Borough. They have done this without compromising the freedom of choice for Home Educators, in fact what they have done is widen that choice; they are providing another option for us and our children. I think this is a very forward thinking move by Dudley Education Authority. I would like to think that they will be regarded as leaders in the field and that other authorities will follow suit. Rather than constantly making demands of home educators they will work with them to help them to provide the best education they can for their children.

Educational professionals requiring further information may like to contact:

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