

Home Education Hostility

By Clare Murton

I have been part of the UK home education community for fifteen years and have witnessed a host of opinions about home education from antagonistic comments, usually from the uninformed, to lots of genuinely curious questions from those with a desire to understand this hugely successful and increasingly popular approach to education.

However, nothing prepared me for the hostility revealed in the recent unguarded LEA submissions to the DfES consultation on the revision of the Pupil Registration Regulations 1995.

Comments from some LEAs frankly act as efficient emetics. Many were more candid about their mistrust of home educators than they are on web sites and publications, though some are prepared to be more public in their disregard for home educators and the law¹.

The consultation elicited the following answers, to the question of whether a child's name should be deleted from the school register on notification of home education (emphasis mine):

"The issue of declaring education otherwise or home education requires far more scrutiny than is currently the practice."

"A child who remains on the school register remains someone's concern."

"...we believe there should be updating of existing guidance possibly in line with the Scottish model, which removes the automatic consent where children are known to other agencies."

"If the pupil is of compulsory school age, not permanently excluded or in secure accommodation, they should be registered at a school – with the school responsible for overseeing their education."

"There needs to be a new duty (in line with the Scottish model) that requires both scrutiny and verification that the alternative educational arrangements are satisfactory and that both learning and safeguarding needs are met."

"The LA would prefer deletion to be mandatory **once the 'home education' provision has been assessed as suitable for the child**. It does seem that there is an argument for retrospective deletion once the suitability of the education provision has been assessed and confirmed".

"in the case of a parent electing to home educate the pupil **shall not** be removed from the roll of the school until the LA has determined the parent's arrangements are suitable because if they were deemed to be unsuitable the pupil should return to school."

Clearly some believe that parents who wish to home educate are simply not trustworthy. They ignore Section 7 of the Education Act 1996, which imposes a duty on the **parent** to choose where their child's education takes place, and seek to adapt the Statutory Instrument to suit their prejudiced assumption that without their intervention parents are unlikely to fulfil their legal duties.

Also, the manner in which the DfES reacted to this consultation was alarmingly amateurish, prejudiced and highlighted similar hostility. Staff consistently displayed a poor grasp of the fundamental issues and of Special Educational Needs implications. They gave confused responses to questions asked by the home education community and refused to engage with some of the main concerns raised.

It is clear from the consultation documents that the DfES intend to introduce a delay (minimum 2 days) in the removal of a child's name from the school register once the school has received notification from a parent of home education. They claim that the time is required for the LEA to set their procedures in motion and to accommodate any sudden change of heart. There is also an inference that this time should be used to persuade families who turn to home education as an

escape from bullying, school refusal or truanting, to keep their child in school. This implies that such a remedy is unsuitable or that those particular parents are automatically unlikely to provide a suitable education.

The lack of respect for and mistrust of those wishing to home educate means that a perfectly sensible way to address Home education concerns have been sidelined in favour of introducing temporarily withheld deregistration, with all of its potential dangers. The simple solution of keeping a school place vacant for a short period is ignored in favour of a system that will allow leeway for those antagonists quoted above, to establish their highly sought after, illegal home education approval system. Such is the hostility of some LEAs and the DfES toward home education.

Nottingham City LEA for example ask head teachers to ignore statute and delay deregistration for fifteen days. If a legal unlimited delay is introduced some parents may never be able to deregister.

Shocked? I was. I knew that some LEAs harass and misinform home educators, but I was not prepared for the blatant suggestions that DfES should ignore or change the law. I had been very naïve in my assessment that those hostile LEAs simply needed more education about alternative educational approaches and that staff turnover was to blame for many misunderstandings. This evidence shows that home education is a clear target. Antagonists are intent on protecting their prejudices whatever the cost to some children.

1. See the policies of Bury, Newham, Nottingham, Southwark, Staffordshire and Waltham Forest for evidence that these LEAs (random examples of the many) know the facts of the law regarding home education but choose nonetheless to create policy and practice that disregards that law.