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## **He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune**

*Government funding and Home Education*

by Deborah W.

One issue which comes up regularly in home-education circles is money.

For many, choosing to home-educate means accepting a reduction in household income. In some home-educating families, one parent is at home full-time – i.e. not earning money. In other families, parents juggle part-time jobs, or work at different times or days, so that one of them can be with their children. Sometimes grandparents fill in some of the childcare gaps. A lot of juggling goes on, and it's no wonder that many of us feel that a bit of extra money would be welcome.

Sometimes it's argued that home-educators should receive funding from the state. There are several factors in support of this. By not using schools, we are saving money for the state – money that came from us as taxes in the first place. Why shouldn't we get some of that money back to help pay for the things we use while home-educating?

Parents who send their children to school reap the benefits of school funding. They get "free" educational provision, and "free" childcare. Isn't it fair that home-educators should also be able to benefit from the state's educational spending? It's pointed out that in law, home-education and school attendance are equally valid options – and schools are state-funded, so why shouldn't home-educators be?

That last question gives us a big clue to one of the problems with the state funding of home-education. The state does indeed fund schools – and the state controls them too.

In the end, the old saying is right – he who pays the piper calls the tune. In this case, schools are the pipers – and the state calls the tune. For many parents, their dislike of the tune is one of the major reasons for choosing to home-educate.

The state tells schools what to teach and, in a variety of ways, how to teach it. The state decides who schools may employ to do the teaching. It decides how much money each school gets, and, largely, controls how it should be spent. The state tries to ensure the adequacy of its educational provision by establishing a curriculum, by monitoring teaching practices, by inspecting, by requiring testing of their pupils. Whether these things are effective is not the subject here; that they are required is what is relevant. State-funded schools are accountable to the state.

That, I feel, is right. This accountability is a good thing. When we pay our taxes, we want our money to be used responsibly. We don't want the state to squander our

money on things which are ineffective; we want them to spend wisely and effectively. We hold government accountable for spending the funds they control in ways that will provide results. We

want the state to be accountable. We don't want governments to be spending taxpayers' money without ensuring (or at least trying to ensure) that it's being used for its designated purpose.

If home-educators were to receive funding, it would doubtless come with similar strings. Government would not agree to hand over money without establishing how it was used. With funding we would be accountable to the state in the same way that schools are.

Is this something that most home-educators want? I don't believe it is. Currently, home-educators in the UK are accountable only to themselves and their children. I do not believe that more than a very small proportion would also wish to be accountable to the state. Most, I think, would prefer the state to stay out of home-education. There would seem to be very little point in home-educating if it meant doing the same thing that schools do. Few home-educators choose to follow the National Curriculum closely, and even among those who do, I doubt if many would want it forced upon them. Home-educators do not, I believe, want to be forced to follow specific teaching practices, to use specific materials or to have our children tested. For many of us, the existence of those kinds of requirements in schools is part of why we choose to home-educate.

Funding would mean that home-educators would have to be registered and monitored. What would that look like? Currently, LEAs have the right to make informal enquiries about educational provision, and when that happens, home-educators have the right to respond in whatever way they wish. Some choose to offer samples of their children's work, some meet with their LEA, some offer written reports. To qualify for funding, it is likely that home-educators would have to comply with much more specific requirements. In other countries, these requirements come in a variety of forms, including requirements to submit teaching plans which must be approved by the local education authority, to teach specific subjects, to "school" for a specific number of days per year and/or hours per week, to record "attendance", to justify "absences", fill in quarterly reports or annual assessments

In some instances there is even regulation of where the educational provision can take place (including building control certificates) and the teaching of bicycle safety and fire and arson prevention and safety! In some states, parents must even hold a teaching certificate before they are permitted to educate their own children at home.

Is this what home-educators in the UK want?

It is sometimes suggested that optional funding would be the solution:

Those home-educators who are willing to jump through the appropriate hoops to receive funding may do so, and those who are unwilling may choose to continue as before. This kind of solution sounds good, but only opens up further problems. Those home-educators who feel that the price of funding (whether it's home visits, standardised testing, samples of work, etc) is too high, and who choose to decline the funding are likely to be viewed as suspicious. After all – there's money on offer, why don't you want it? There could be an assumption that those who decline such schemes must have something to hide. As more people accept funding (and the requirements), it would become increasingly difficult for those who didn't – no doubt told that nobody else objects to visits, or having their children tested, or whatever. The implication would be that there is something "wrong" with the family who chooses not to participate.

The lack of understanding of reasons for declining funding has an interesting parallel in the lack of understanding of reasons for home-educating that already exists. After all, there's educational provision on offer, and it's free, and it's good enough for most families – so why don't you want it?

The result, then, of optional funding for home-educators would be to put some families in a 'lose-lose' situation: they lose part of their freedom by accepting the requirements that go along

with the funding, or they lose the presumption of innocence. We can see this from what already happens in some LEAs where parents who choose not to accept home visits are viewed with deep suspicion – for choosing an option which is completely legal.

Unfortunately, the price of state-funded education is that such education is also state-controlled.