

Written evidence submitted by Joanna Burr to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB65)

Introduction

I am a home educating parent of 3 children and am very concerned by the content of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and how it will affect my children and our family. I believe it will be extremely detrimental to my children's right to an education suitable to their age/stage of development and will make home education more difficult and less accessible which will have a negative effect on all home educated children.

Executive Summary

In this submission I will cover the following:

- **Background** – an explanation of why we chose to home educate and some of the challenges we've faced.
 - **Areas of Concern** - a look at the chief areas of concern in this Bill from the perspective of a home educator. These concerns include:
 - What is a "suitable education"?
 - Mandatory Registration
 - Home Visits
 - Discrimination & Lack of Understanding of the Communities Impacted
 - Failure to Address Fundamental Issues Within School System
 - Impact on Educational Resources
 - Funding
 - Wider Context & Underlying Motivations
 - **Recommendations**
 - **Conclusion**
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Background

We first began considering home education as an option for our family while I was doing a degree in Early Childhood Studies, prior to having our own children. Through my placements in schools and nurseries I was able to see the environment that children are exposed to in the education system. I met

children who had not long started school and watched them turn from confident, happy children to much quieter, subdued individuals. I was particularly distressed to notice that those who were naturally quieter were labelled the “good” children and were almost entirely ignored because the teachers’ attention was taken by managing the disruptive behaviours of some of their classmates.

Both my husband and I were the “good”, quiet children growing up and we both felt that we were left to drift at school because we didn’t attract attention to ourselves. My husband’s parents took quite a hands-on approach to his education and encouraged him to do well in his studies. My parents were more of the opinion that I should manage my education myself & left me to it with little to no guidance for how to succeed.

After I discussed my concerns with my husband about the effect of the school environment on children like we had been, we agreed to take on the responsibility of educating our own children ourselves, at least for the first few years. Our eldest is now a teenager and has blossomed into a confident, independent learner who pursues his various interests as well as takes an active role in organising his own studies. Our younger children are also progressing well with their education and we are confident that home education was the right choice for all of them.

All of our children have faced challenges with their education: one has an autism diagnosis, another dyslexia, and another has suspected ADHD. Home education has enabled them to progress at a pace that was right for them. For example, until the age of 10 our dyslexic child was unable to read beyond the simplest words. One year later, he’d become a competent reader because he was never forced to compare himself to others, or made to feel like it was a failing on his part. He has no self-esteem issues regarding his reading, as are common amongst many dyslexic children, because we’ve been able to explain to him that his brain works a bit differently and focus on his many other strengths, while gently supporting his reading through other interests. We have no doubt that, had he been in school, he would have struggled with all areas of his education because there isn’t the funding available to provide one-to-one support for children with additional needs. He’s flourishing now because we have had the freedom to educate him in the way that suited him best.

Areas of Concern Surrounding the Bill

- **What is a “suitable education”? Who decides what this looks like for an individual?**

My first concern with increased governmental oversight is the idea that someone (with perhaps limited training) will be judging whether the education I provide for my children is “suitable.”

They will, presumably, be judging this against some idealised standard that ‘all’ children should attain by a specific age. This fails to take into account the diversity in abilities and learning styles that home education is particularly good for. My dyslexic child, for example, would probably have been labelled as “failing” a few years ago due to his struggles with learning to read. If this bill goes through in its current form, a child like him might have been forced to attend school, where there isn’t the funding available for support and his wellbeing would have been detrimentally affected. Home education gave us the freedom to be patient until he was ready and this led to his

mental health being protected as he didn't have that pressure of thinking he was "failing" because he wasn't at the same stage as others his age.

I am very concerned that someone who does not know my children or the learning journey they have been on will have the power to overrule me on how suitable their education is. To avoid any miscommunications I would have to spend many hours detailing every learning opportunity/group/resource I have ever provided them, how they engaged with it, whether it worked for them, why it did/didn't work, what alternatives I plan to use... To be frank, my time is better spent educating my children than trying to convince some arbitrary individual that I am doing it well enough in their subjective opinion.

- **Mandatory Registration**

I strongly object to mandatory registration. Parents are being asked to provide detailed personal information on their children. This is problematic as it infringes on the child's right to privacy and may lead to unwarranted state intrusion.

- **Home Visits**

This leads to my next concern - we have a right to a family life free from government interference. By insisting on home visits, this implies that there is sufficient evidence that of criminal behaviour to warrant breaching Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Choosing to exercise our responsibility to ensure our children are receiving a suitable education is not a crime and should never be treated as such.

- **Discrimination & Lack of Understanding of the Communities Impacted**

Another issue with home visits is that many children who are home educated are neurodivergent or have been traumatised by school experiences. These children need their home to be a safe space for them as they learn to navigate the outside world. Forcing them to accept a stranger into their house to assess them could compound their trauma and risk further damaging their wellbeing.

- **Failure to Address Fundamental Issues Within School System**

This bill seems to scapegoat home educators without really addressing why so many children and families are opting to home educate instead of using the school system. Some home educators would much prefer to send their child to school but have found that the current school system is not fit for purpose for their child. There needs to be an overhaul of the school system to ensure it is suitable for children and going to equip them to thrive in our modern world.

- **Impact on Educational Resources**

The bill requires reporting on all educational activities which will dramatically increase the administrative burden on both parents and providers. Not only this, but many providers try to operate at minimal costs, some providing free resources, to ensure that education is accessible to all. The requirements in this bill would result in them either having to charge more to cover their admin time or stopping providing resources to home educators altogether. Some providers create content which they make freely available and do not necessarily ever engage with the individual child directly – how are they to provide details of the children that they educate? It would also impact on groups such as Scouts, Guides, and religious groups such as Sunday schools and church youth groups, since these groups often involve some element of education. In short, if this bill goes through, home educators will have fewer resources available to us which, surely, is counter to the aim of improving access to education for all children.

- **Funding**

If the bill were to be implemented in its entirety, where would the funding come from? The school system is underfunded, as are local authorities. There would need to be a lot of investment to fund setting up a mandatory register of children, let alone how much it would cost to set up a compulsory ID number system or investigate all home educating families. There simply isn't the money for such undertakings at a time when the country is already struggling to fund essential services such as the NHS, etc.

- **Wider Context & Underlying Motivations**

I am concerned about the use of the tragic murder of Sara Sharif to push this government's anti-home-ed agenda. Sara was known to multiple agencies, and on multiple registers, throughout her life. I cannot see how being on another register would have helped her when so many agencies failed her. She died in August, in the school holidays, when she wouldn't have been seen by anyone even if she was still regularly attending school. Are the government going to campaign against school holidays next? What about weekends? By this logic we should put all children in institutions where they can be monitored for signs of potential abuse 24-7. To the best of my knowledge, in all of the high profile cases that have been used to campaign for more restrictions on home-education, the child has been known to social services. Perhaps there should be better investment and monitoring of social services, instead of home educators.

It is also concerning to me that this bill would seek to introduce compulsory ID numbers for all children without any further public consultation. This would be a major shift in policy for this country and should not be undertaken lightly.

Recommendations for Further Action

Firstly, I would ask that you engage with experts such as Dr Naomi Fisher and home education groups like Education Otherwise to gain a better understanding of the needs and diversity of the home education community. There is a lack of understanding amongst non-home-educators about the realities of home education, especially regarding parental motivations and outcomes for the children. Please ensure you can understand us before you seek to impose restrictions that will make our lives more difficult and detrimentally affect our children's futures.

My other recommendation is that you seriously consider why there is a mental health crisis amongst the children and young people in this country, ensuring that you look deeper than just blaming social media. Please look at the role of the school system and how forcing children into a "one size fits all" approach to education is damaging and hinders so much creativity and potential for out-of-the-box thinking that will be fundamental for the success of the country.

Conclusion

This bill will be detrimental to the entire home education community. It will affect our family life, potentially violating our human rights in the process, and decrease our children's educational opportunities. It stems from a discriminatory attitude within both the government and the wider society due to a lack of understanding of home education which needs to be addressed before attempting to impose restrictions on our way of life.

There is not funding available to properly implement all the suggestions and any spare funding that could be found would be better spent improving the school system so that those whose children want to access it can do so successfully.

This bill will have a negative effect on the wellbeing of many home educated children and so will not achieve its stated aims. If you want to improve outcomes for home educated children then listen to parents, home ed providers & experts and engage with us. Work with us, don't penalise us for trying to do what is best for our children.

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