

Written evidence submitted by Debbie Adshead to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB67)

I am a parent of 3 school aged children, 2 children are in school and one is home educated. I wish to put forward our lived experience of home education and our concerns around the proposed bill.

Executive summary

In this submission I will cover:

- Background - our experience of the current school system and why we feel we had no choice but to home educate one of our children
- Areas of concern -
 - Having to provide information for every provider that we access will cause a huge workload for parents and may result in less provision on offer, which is not in children's best interests.

Having to gain permission from the LA to remove a child from a SEN school is discriminatory, and not in children's best interests.

Failing to address the issues within schools is dangerous and neglectful when so many children are not coping in school.

- Recommendations for Further Action - My views on what the government should be considering

Background

We are a family with 3 school aged children. Our middle child has SEND and has always struggled with school. When he moved to the junior school he began to struggle even more and his ability to cope in school declined rapidly. He would become very distressed when we left him at school and he would generally stay that way all day. One day he screamed for the whole day, a trip to the GP confirmed that his vocal chords were swollen from the distress he had been in all day. Other days he would stand on the school field and rip his clothes off his body in pouring down rain. If staff tried to approach him he would run off. His main way to protect himself was to curl up in a ball on the floor and stay there all day. He lost a whole school year curled up on the floor in reception. He never entered the classroom, never interacted with a single person, never picked up a pencil. We applied for an EHCP for him which was initially refused by the LA, they deemed a child curled up on the floor never entering a classroom as 'receiving a suitable education'. We were given no support in how

to deal with this situation, we received daily threats from the headteacher that if we didn't leave him there for the full school day then he would mark him as unauthorised absent. One day our son's arm was bleeding with numerous cuts all the way from his wrist to his elbow, from trying to squeeze through a gap in the fence. I was called to go and get him out of the fence and bandage his arm, but was told by the headteacher that if I took him home (40 minutes before home time) then he would mark him as absent for the whole day. I had to bandage my shaking and bleeding child up and walk out of the building without him, he obviously learnt nothing sat in reception shaking and in pain for 40 minutes, but in the eyes of the LA that was a suitable education. After appealing the EHCP decision we eventually got him an EHCP. We viewed a specialist school that we thought would be suitable, our son loved it and interacted with both staff and pupils whilst there. We also viewed another school which our son really disliked and said he would never go. This school would require our son to travel in a taxi which we explained wasn't possible, he is diagnosed with anxiety and travelling without us isn't something that he can do. The LA named the school that our child couldn't attend, we asked (almost begged) them to leave him at his current school and put extra support in place, we explained that he would never be able to access their named school and if they took him off roll at his current school then he wouldn't be attending any school. The LA wouldn't listen to us and took him off roll anyway. So from that day our child didn't go to school, due to the LA taking him off roll without our consent. We attempted to appeal the decision at tribunal but the LA acted in what we can only describe as corrupt, to make sure that we lost our appeal for the SEN school that we had viewed. The lies that they told the tribunal were unbelievable to us, but very believable to other SEND parents who all receive the same treatment on a daily basis. The LA is driven by finances and the best interests of the child does not come into their decision making. We spent a few months trying to do weekly online calls with the named school, our son wouldn't look at the computer screen, and he put his headphones on so that he couldn't hear them. When we went on holiday in the summer he saw our laptop and became really distressed thinking that we were going to do the online calls whilst on holiday. At that point we knew that we had no option other than home education. We had spent over 6 thousand pounds on reports, a private psychiatrist, private medication, all to try to keep our child in school. The LA worked against us at every turn and made sure that he didn't get a suitable education. 9 months after they made him leave his local school they have made no attempt to help in any way, they won't look at or suggest any other school, they are more than happy for us to home educate to save them the cost of educating our son.

On a more positive note, since we started home educating in April we have seen the most amazing improvement in our child. Initially he didn't want to leave the house for anything. He has gradually improved and now wants to go out every day. When he was in school he wouldn't eat or drink anything all day so he was put under the dietician for his low weight, since leaving school he's gained over 3kg in weight and this is now no longer a concern for his doctors. He is engaging in educational work with us every day. He goes to an in person maths class each week, and has 4 online lessons with tutors. He lost over a year of education whilst in school so he was very behind when we started home educating, he's now learning so well that he's completing maths work that's usually taught to children a school year older than him. He goes to regular meet ups with other home educated children and he now feels like he has some friends, which he never had in school. He is now a happy child who is thriving with his education, rather than sitting curled up on the floor of a school building not even surviving.

Submission

Providing full details of any providers used

We are concerned that the admin time required to supply all of the information suggested would be too much for parents, who are already dedicating the majority of their time to educating their child. We personally use numerous different online tutors, attend numerous different groups and rarely do the same things each week. There is an unlimited amount of resources online that Home educating parents use daily to assist in their teaching. Most of these are used once for a few minutes to help to explain something. For example this week we were learning long multiplication, we watched 7-8 short youtube videos of different teachers showing their way of doing this. There were some variations on where each teacher placed their carried over numbers, so we watched a few different videos until we found the way that worked best for us. If I then had to find the name and postal address of each of those teachers in the videos, then that 20 minutes of education would have turned into 1 or 2 hours of admin work. The admin work would have to be done at the time to avoid losing the video that we had watched, so our child's education would constantly be disrupted with me trying to find the details of 2 minute online videos that we will probably never watch again. This would be too much work for anyone to realistically do, so parents would have no choice but to stop using a lot of resources, to reduce the admin work. This is not in the child's best interests.

If providers have to start supplying details then they will stop offering the provision, or charge more money to cover their admin time. An online science teacher who helps numerous home educated children pass their science iGCSE every year has already voiced that she can't possibly take on anymore admin work. We went to a home ed meet up last week at our local indoor scooter park. It was busier than at weekends and full to capacity. Our son loved being with the other children who he sees as 'like him' and he made a new friend who he is looking forward to seeing again at the next scooter park meet. If the scooter park have to start submitting information for 50 children for that session then they will either significantly increase the price (making it inaccessible for a lot of families) or they will just stop opening up for the home ed group. Group organisers will start to discriminate against home educated children to avoid the extra work. None of this is in the children's best interests.

Deregistration from Special schools

The bill proposes that Local authorities should refuse deregistration from specialist schools if it is not deemed in the child's best interests. Local authorities are not the correct people to decide what is in a Child's best interests, the parents are. As you can see from our sons experience in school, the local authority left him curled up on the floor for 6 hours per day, not being educated, not speaking to anyone, screaming so hard he lost his voice, not eating or drinking, and they deemed that acceptable. I find it very discriminatory that I would be allowed to deregister my 2 non SEN children at any point, but if my SEN child was in a specialist school then I would have to request permission. As parents we are just as capable of acting in the best interests of our SEN child as we are our non SEN children. The reality is that if a child is in a specialist school, then the parents will have fought tooth and nail to get

that school place, local authorities don't give them away without a fight. If a parent has already battled the SEN system to get their child a place in a specialist school, then they won't be making the decision to de register them lightly. To have got the specialist place to start with shows the amount of commitment and determination those parents have got to get the correct education for their child. We have all seen the disturbing news articles on how some specialist schools can treat their children. Parents must retain the right to protect their child as they see fit. Local authorities are driven by finance, targets and numerous other incentives which leave the best interests of the child at the bottom of their list. Local authorities make poor decisions regarding SEN children daily, as tribunal results show. Local Authorities are not fit to make decision's like this. Taking away the rights of the parent to protect their child is not in the children's best interests.

In our personal circumstances we may look at schools again once our child reaches secondary age. If we can get him into a school that we think may be suitable then we might try it. Many home educated children try school again once they have started to recover from their trauma. For some it works out but for many they are quickly de registered once they start suffering trauma again. If Local authorities are given any power to prevent parents from de registering then families won't ever try school again. We certainly won't put our son into a school again if there is any doubt over our ability to de register him if he is suffering. The children in specialist schools do not need protecting from their parents, they have the most dedicated parents in the country, who will have fought for years to get them to where they are. Giving Local authorities this power would not be in any child's best interests, and would prevent numerous families from ever putting their child into a specialist school to start with.

Failing to address the issues with schools

We are concerned that this Bill seems to focus on reducing the amount of home educated children, and reducing the quality of life for home educated children, without addressing the issue that is causing most to be home educated in the first place. Schools are currently not fit for SEN children. They are abusing and neglecting them daily. These children are not receiving a suitable education whilst in school, and the government and local authorities are turning a blind eye because of cost. If a Children's Well Being Bill is going to be implemented then the main focus should be on improving the school experience for every child. What our son experienced in school was abuse and neglect, and it was all approved by the government. Until schools are providing a suitable education to every child, without traumatising them to provide it, then the focus of the government should be on schools.

Recommendation's for further action

I feel that much more understanding is needed regarding the home educating community before passing laws that will affect us. I would urge the committee to listen to home educating parents, and work with professionals that regularly work in this area. Rather than focussing on taking away parental rights, the committee should be focussing on the state of the school system and what can be done to make schools more accessible to all children.

Conclusion

Home educating was never our intention. We were forced into it by a failing school system. But we have now seen the benefits of home educating, and experienced how amazing it is for a lot of children. The resources that we can access from home are never ending. The opportunities for our children are vast. The ability to work at their own pace, using their own interests, with no distractions, means that our children can receive an education that a school could only dream of giving them. Socialising opportunities are growing, our son accesses a different group every day of the week. He now has friends and feels like he fits in, which he never did at school. The home educating community are the most committed, dedicated and passionate parents in the country. Home educating families are not a danger to children, they are taking responsibility and providing an education and opportunities to their children that the government have failed to do.

If this Bill passes into Law as it currently stands, then home educated children will be denied many opportunities that they currently receive.

We are considering looking for a school place for our son when he reaches secondary school age. If this Bill passes into Law then we will never put our son back into the school system if the parental right to deregister is taken away.

Nothing in this Bill is in the best interests of home educated children.

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