

Skipping School: Invisible Children

Introduction and background

The Schools Adjudicator reports that the total number of children reported by local authorities as being electively home educated in March 2018 was 52,770 across all 152 local authorities. An Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) survey in autumn 2018 found that across the 106 councils completing the survey, around 40,000 children were being home educated. That suggests around 58,000 children were being home educated across England as a whole. The precise figures are unknown since parents do not have to register children who are home-educated; councils use other sources to estimate the numbers. ADCS reported that the number of children known by councils to be home educated had risen by 27 per cent since 2017, continuing a trend of rising numbers; figures have doubled since 2013-14. This report from the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, summarises some of the key issues surrounding Elective Home Education (EHE).

Key points

The legal and policy context

- Parents in England who wish to home educate their children are required to write a letter to the school who must then notify the local authority. However, children who have never attended school, or who move area, may be unknown to the authorities.
- If a child is withdrawn from school to be home educated, they do not have any right to return to that school at a later date. Parents who choose to home educate assume full financial responsibility for doing so, including exam costs.
- Local councils have an obligation to identify children not receiving a suitable education, but they have no legal duty to monitor home educators and do not have the powers to insist on visiting the home to carry out checks on the education unless they have a welfare concern.
- Councils can request information from a parent and if they are concerned can issue a school attendance order (SAO) requiring the child to attend a school. However, this process can take months and there are concerns that SAOs are too weak.
- Councils lack resources to effectively monitor and support home education. According to recent research, there are an average of 295 home educated children for each full-time council home education officer, and 87 per cent of councils say they do not have the resources necessary to offer support to all of the children and families who choose to home school in their areas. Local authorities do not have a duty to provide support: some offer a home visit, but many just provide links to websites.
- Many children and parents reported to the Children's Commissioner that they only chose home education because the situation at school had become so desperate for the children involved. This includes many children with special educational needs (SEND). Recent research by Channel 4's 'Dispatches' programme found that 22 per cent of children withdrawn from school to be home educated in the 2017-18 academic year had SEND.
- The Children's Commissioner has heard of numerous school practices which make it more difficult for children with additional needs to succeed. These include hardline behaviour policies in which pupils receive two or three warnings for any breach of the behaviour code before being sent to an isolation room booth to work in silence for the rest of the day. This is particularly detrimental for children with conditions such as ADHD.
- A further strategy illegally deployed by some schools is sending children home to 'cool off' if they become angry or overwhelmed, rather than addressing their needs head on in school.
- Funding per pupil has fallen by 8 per cent since 2010 and 94 per cent of school leaders say that they are finding it harder to fund support for pupils with SEND. According to the National Association of Headteachers, 'the financial burden of additional support penalises those schools that are the most inclusive'. Schools are being forced to cut additional support such as learning assistants and pastoral teams, making it more difficult for children with additional needs to cope.
- In a 2018 report, the House of Commons Education Committee highlighted concerns that children who are not making good progress in the run up to exams, perhaps because they have additional needs that are not being met, are being abandoned in order to protect the schools' overall Progress 8 scores.

Unmet needs

- Many parents withdraw their children from school because they feel that the child's needs are not being met. In some cases, the relationship with the school has broken down. This perception of unmet needs is one of the main reasons for the recent growth in home education.

- Under-identification of children's needs is a further concern, particularly for children who do not have an Education, Health and Care Plan but may have low-level conditions which present serious problems in the classroom. Teachers say they do not have the training, support or capacity to diagnose these problems accurately.

Off-rolling or exclusion?

- Sometimes the decision to home educate is driven by the school, often because of a focus on exam results. This practice is known as 'off-rolling'. It is defined by Ofsted as: 'The practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil.' Off-rolling is distinct from formal exclusion, when a proper process must be followed. It is often referred to as illegal exclusion.
- Some parents report that they opted for home education after the school threatened to exclude their child or fine them for non-attendance, believing that this would help their children by avoiding a formal record of exclusion. They often sign up for home education without realising that they are giving up important safeguards.
- An ADCS survey suggests that the age group where home education is rising most rapidly is key stage 4, the critical GCSE years – up by 32 per cent since 2017. This suggests that there may be a practice of off-rolling of pupils who are about to sit their GCSEs and might negatively affect a school's results.
- The Children's Commissioner's Office gathered data on the number of children who had been specifically withdrawn into home education to across 11 local areas (LAs) in England between 2015-16 and 2017-18. Councils were chosen where there were a high number of fixed-term exclusions, which qualitative research had suggested might be associated with off-rolling.
- Across the 9 areas which provided data on children withdrawn from school into home education for the whole period, there was an increase of 48 per cent. The year-on-year growth has accelerated: from 8 per cent between 2015-16 and 2016-17, to 37 per cent between 2016-17 and 2017-18.
- The numbers of children being withdrawn into home education are rising rapidly among primary school children as well. The overall rate of increase in the 9 areas providing data from 2015-16 to 2017-18 was 32 per cent at primary schools and 71 per cent at secondary schools, over this period.
- In 2017-18, half of elective home education referrals in these 11 LAs were concentrated in just 10 per cent of schools, while 80 per cent of the referrals came from a quarter of the schools. There is also evidence that the practice is spreading: between 2015-16 and 2017-18, the proportion of schools making no referrals at all to home education fell from 59 per cent to 49 per cent.
- The data collected gives some weight to the claim that academies are 'off-rolling' more than LA schools. In 2017-18, academies had a rate of 2.8 EHE referrals for every 1,000 children, compared with 2.4 per 1,000 children for LA-run schools.

Under the radar

- One of the main issues with home education is that it means that some children are out of sight of the authorities. Ninety-three per cent of councils are not confident that they know which children are being home educated in their area. Some parents use this light-touch

regulation to their advantage and may choose to home educate because the school has made a referral to social services.

- Local authorities have no duty to monitor home education which means that children may go for years without contact with any professional. The consequences of lack of oversight can be disastrous; home education has been considered a contributory factor in the deaths of 6 children in the past decade.
- Under current guidance, a setting must register as a school with the Department for Education as the regulator if it is attended by five or more pupils on a full-time basis (generally interpreted as more than 18 hours per week). Some parents claim that they are home educating their children, when in reality they are sending them to unregistered and illegal schools (or "tuition centres") where they receive a substandard education and welfare standards are dubious.

The impact on children

- Some children have very positive experiences of home education, where parents are well prepared and have the right support. In other cases, children have described feeling lonely and depressed, left alone for long periods in unstructured days. They miss their friends at school and can become isolated.
- Parents who lack any kind of teaching experience, or who may even struggle to read and write themselves, are expected to draw up a curriculum with little or no support.
- Children are missing out on weeks, months if not years of education, only to return to school and then drop out again as their problems remain unaddressed.
- For many children home education is meant to be a short-term arrangement. However, during this time, the problems that led to the child being home educated in the first place, such as school refusal or other mental health problems, can become worse, making it even less likely that school will be a success for the child when they do eventually return. This creates a vicious cycle where children oscillate between home education and school.

Recommendations

- A home education register should be established in order to identify all children who are being home educated. There should be a requirement for parents to inform the local authority if they move away from the area and to re-register the child with their new local authority. Councils should put information-sharing agreements in place.
- Measures to tackle 'off-rolling' should be strengthened, for example through a greater focus in Ofsted inspections.
- There should be more advice and guidance for families about the decision to home educate. The local authority should visit the child and family to provide advice and support on alternative options, including other schools the child could attend. There should be a follow-up visit 4-6 weeks later.
- There should be greater oversight of children. Council education officers should visit each child being home educated at least once per term to assess the suitability of their education and their welfare.
- More decisive action needs to be taken against unregulated schools. The government must strengthen the law so that it is easier to prosecute illegal schools.
- The Children's Commissioner supports Ofsted in calling for a clearer definition of "full-time education" in law, so that unregistered settings can no longer exploit this loophole to evade prosecution.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/skipping-school-invisible-children/>