

School-Home Support briefing: Children Not in School (Registers, Support and Orders) Bill

Second Reading, 15 March 2024



Recommendations

- Legislate for a Children Not in School register at the earliest opportunity to make it easier to identify families who need support with school.
- Ensure all schools can access whole family support services to help families tackle the underlying causes of absence early on so problems don't escalate.
- Review how schools and the wider education system communicate with parents, including the use of fines.

Overview

- Local authorities have **no way of knowing how many children are receiving home education**, and they do not have the tools to support children who may be falling through the cracks in our education system.
- While most children receive a high quality home education, **some children are homeschooled because their needs are not met at school**, such as 14 year old Gabriel (not his real name).
- Existing data indicates **children eligible for free school meals, have an EHCP or SEND, or have a history of school absences and exclusions are more likely to move to home education**.
- A Children Not in School register would ensure **local authorities have the tools to identify children, such as Gabriel, whose parents feel that homeschooling is the only option** but are unable to meet their child's educational needs.
- **Increasing fines does little to solve absence**, and may push more families who are financially struggling to withdraw their child from school to avoid paying fines.
- **A whole family support approach works** by supporting families who are facing challenges to their child's attendance.
- Gabriel was supported by a School-Home Support practitioner who took **a whole family approach to support Gabriel and his mum**. Gabriel is no longer homeschooled and is now attending an Alternative Provision Unit.

A Children Not in School register will help identify families who may need support

The number of children who are home educated, and their reasons for home education, are simply unknown.

While many parents move their child into home education for their child's best interest, some may not be able to choose so freely. Children such as 14 year old Gabriel (not his real name) may move to home education because their needs are not being met at school.

Gabriel's story

Gabriel was withdrawn from school because there was a lack of support and educational plan to support his ADHD and sensory impairment diagnosis. His mum, Roisin, wanted the best for her child, but felt she had no choice but to homeschool Gabriel.

As a single mum, Roisin struggled to homeschool Gabriel and keep the family financially stable. The pressure of homeschooling led to a relationship breakdown between Gabriel and mum, and they needed help.

School-Home Support practitioner Carol worked with Gabriel to build trust and create an Education, Health and Care plan (ECHP), and helped transition Gabriel to an Alternative Provision Unit (APU). She sourced ear defenders to support his sensory impairment to ease his anxieties at the APU. Carol also worked with Roisin to give support for Gabriel's learning at home, and provided food vouchers to reduce the financial burden.

(All names were changed)

We worry that there are many more children like Gabriel who are not receiving the support they need to receive a good education. Existing data suggests that children with a ECHP or SEND, are eligible for free school meals, or have a history of school absences and exclusions are more likely to be home educated.¹

A Children Not in School Bill would ensure that children on the periphery of the education system are not forgotten about, and children who need extra support are identified.

¹ Centre for Social Justice, 2021, 'Out of sight and out of mind'.

The intention of the register should not be to apply pressure on parents and unregistered educational settings that are providing good education. Instead, it should be geared towards ensuring that the number of children receiving home education is known, and that those children are receiving the education and support that they need.

For some families who feel that homeschooling is their only option for their child, they may need whole family support to integrate their child into mainstream school. The Children Not in School register should allow data to be shared to strengthen multi-agency working.

Recommendation 1: Legislate for a Children Not in School register at the earliest opportunity to make it easier to identify families who need support with school.

A whole family support approach works by supporting families who are facing challenges to their child's attendance

School-Home Support practitioners, like Gabriel's practitioner Carol, tackle barriers to school attendance by using a whole family support approach. They take a comprehensive approach which looks at the interconnected factors affecting a child's attendance, gives targeted intervention, and builds capacity within families and individuals. They strengthen the bridge between home and school, and deliver the best outcomes for children.

Gabriel's story shows how a whole family support practitioner can address challenges facing a family that may have led them to homeschool their child.

Persistent absence seems to be a precursor to a child being withdrawn from school and into home education. The number of children moved into 'no final destination' (some of whom would have moved to home education) who had a history of persistent absence was three times higher than the number of children who were never persistently absent (6.1% and 1.9% respectively).²

Our whole family approach has also seen **70% of children who received intensive support increase their attendance by 8.4%**. That is equivalent to an additional 17 days in school.³

² Centre for Social Justice, 2022, 'Out of sight and out of mind'; FFT Education Datalab, 2021, 'Who's left 2021'

³ School-Home Support, 2023, 'Impact Report 2022/23'

The upfront investment in family support practitioners generates long-term savings. It costs School-Home Support about £1,000 to support one tailored plan per child per year, compared to the £2,166 cost for that same child missing at least 5 weeks of school.⁴

Investing in a whole family support practitioner will ensure that children like Gabriel are properly supported so that their educational needs are met, and they can receive their education in a setting that is in the child's best interest.

Recommendation 2: Ensure schools can access whole family support services to help families tackle the underlying causes of absence early on so problems don't escalate.

Increasing fines risks alienating families

Low attendance must be viewed as a symptom of wider issues within the family. Fines attempt to address the symptom of school absence, and do not address the cause.

For a vulnerable family whose children have low attendance and are facing multiple challenges, **fines are likely to be counterproductive.** For example, some families already facing financial stress may decide that withdrawing their child from school is the best option to avoid continuing to pay fines. These families are likely to struggle with providing their child with a good education.

Increasing fines risks damaging the relationship between parents and schools, and may result in more families feeling forced to home educate their child, when their child would benefit more from receiving support and attending school.

Research from Public First found fines fail to change parent behaviour, and undermine the relationships between schools and parents. Public First recommends a review in the way fines are implemented, and an evaluation into the impact of fines.⁵

Recommendation 3: Review how schools and the wider education system communicate with parents, including the use of fines.

⁴ Greater Manchester Combined Authority, 2022, 'Cost Benefit Analysis', https://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/7283/gmca-unit-cost-database-v2_3_1-final.xlsx

⁵ Public First, 2023, 'Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis'

Contact details

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