

Home educated young people taking exams: How private schools can help us

From the session on “public benefit, thinking more creatively” at the 2009 ISC conference

- ❖ “I am a parent of two children on the autistic spectrum. My children were educated both in state and independent education for many years and had been unable to either cope or learn in what they felt were extremely stressful environments. I was told by an educational psychologist that they would be unable to complete GCSEs but we are now able to use a school which seems to be totally centred on catering for each individual child. To date, given the environment, approach and friendliness of the staff, my son against the odds, has managed to gain two a*s, and two b's for his modules which is incredible for a child previously written off. I can only be extremely grateful and full of praise for the school and it's staff and thank them for giving my children along with many other home educated children a better chance in the future.”
- ❖ “My daughter used the school for geography last year and maths this year. I found the school to be very helpful and amenable. The whole experience was as stress free for my daughter as possible. It was wonderful to find a school locally where she could sit the exams.”
- ❖ “The school provide a brilliant exam centre service for home educated children at a minimal cost to parents. Thanks to their generosity and community-spirit our children have so far been able to sit two exams via the school's system. I haven't had any direct dealing with the School as this has all been done through [the parent co-ordinator] but it all seems to be well-organised, the facilities provided for the exam are very good (we used a church hall - it was private, quiet and there was a separate room provided for candidates that need extra time). We are very grateful for their support.”
- ❖ “My daughter has been using the school this year for Maths GCSE and they have been very helpful. My daughter tends to get stressed in new places but she feels at ease (or as at ease as you can be when sitting an exam) there. Finding exam venues isn't easy and I am thankful to them for making the effort. Previous attempts to secure an exam place at other private schools met with no luck, even when they are doing the same syllabus.”
- ❖ “Without this facility we would have been very stuck as main stream school was out of the question for my child, home education was the only way we could fulfil his Individual Education Plan. Everything has been very straight forward and stress free due to the generosity of [the parent co-ordinator's] time and effort and the friendly can-do attitude of the school. The candidates were noticeably relaxed before the exam, I am not sure if that was due to the venue they use (a local church building) but whatever the reason it is a bonus.”
- ❖ “My daughter has taken two exams at the school. At both times they were very welcoming, well organised and understanding. It's good to find somewhere that understands that this isn't a problem. It makes a massive difference to families like ours.”

How many children are home educated?

We do not have precise figures but informed estimates suggest that there are around 50,000 home educated children and young people in England and Wales. The two major support organisations for home educating families in England and Wales are Education Otherwise and the Home Education Advisory Service.

<http://www.education-otherwise.org/>

<http://www.heas.org.uk/>

How many home educated young people are taking exams?

Education Otherwise believes that there are currently up to 500 young people a year taking exams as external candidates in independent schools and in private tuition centres. Evidence suggests that there could be twice as many home educated young people who are currently disadvantaged by not being able to find anywhere to take exams.

Why do families choose home education?

We are seeing more children and young people withdrawn from school, because their educational needs are not being met; because they are at risk of becoming disengaged from learning in the system; or because they have been the victims of bullying or have become ostracised and miserable at school for being “different” which may include being more studious. The families are often at their wits end.

Home educators make huge financial sacrifices for their children. They may or may not feel they have a choice about home education but it is certainly the case that most families we know have already tried hard to make school work before they opt out. It is absolutely not a decision which a family could possibly take lightly.

School trauma and bullying

As Jane Lowe from Home Education Advisory Service wrote in the ISC May 2009 bulletin:

“Bullying is mentioned in around 60% of enquiries received by both charities. Sadly, an increasing number of children have medical needs including depression, anxiety, and other chronic illnesses.

Problems arising from special educational needs are also common. Some home educators live too far away from a suitable school and some children do not have a school place at all. Traumatic life experiences have driven several children to attempt suicide. Both EO and HEAS receive calls from anguished parents, urgently seeking advice on how to ensure their child continues their education but away from the establishment that has been the cause of much unhappiness.”

Home education is also a positive choice

Jane also adds that “not all home educated learners, however, are refugees from the school system. Some are motivated by deeply-felt philosophical, pedagogical or religious convictions. Some such parents come to EO and HEAS for information on what their options are well in advance of GCSE, with the benefit of time to plan the best possible education for their child.”

How hard is it to take exams if you are home educated?

Families come to home education and are horrified at how difficult and expensive it is to sort out exams, how they are expected to cold call from a list of phone numbers and cope with being knocked back. They are also appalled at how little help is given by local authorities, while at the same time they may be harried by the authorities to provide proof of education.

Can't home educators use state schools to sit exams?

It comes as a shock to many people when they discover that the maintained sector is under no obligation to help with exam centre access for home educated private candidates. The government's attitude has been "you made your bed, now you lie on it." When families approach state schools, they are turned back. When they approach the local authority for help with finding a school to sit exams they are generally told that the LA has no power to make schools accept them.

Other options : Pupil Referral Units/private tuition centres

Exceptionally, in a very few authorities the Pupil Referral Unit facilities are made available to home educated private candidates to sit basic GCSEs; otherwise the family has to find a private tuition centre (predominantly in London and the South of England) or start phoning round private schools. It is fair to say that many of our members find this process extremely intimidating and overwhelming. It can also be very expensive.

Families travel hundreds of miles to find an exam centre

We know of cases where families travel hundreds of miles to a centre if they find someone who can help them out. They sleep in tents or Youth Hostels or scour the internet for cheap hotel deals if they are not able to stay with friends. If the household is headed by a single parent, the entire family including much younger children will probably have to travel with the exam candidate. Where the candidate has special educational needs, for instance where the candidate is on the autistic spectrum, the uncertainty and the unfamiliar surroundings cause huge stress which affects the rest of the family and can have a negative impact on exam performance. In a very few cases, as can be seen in the testimonials above, families are fortunate to find a local school prepared to help them.

Importance of gaining qualifications by age 16

For the vast majority of young people it is imperative to pass their Level 2 qualifications as a passport to Further Education and Higher Education. Few colleges will take candidates on to Level 3 without GCSEs/Level Two at 16. Colleges either don't do GCSEs for 16+ or only do a restricted range as re-sits for failed candidates. Colleges don't get funding for under 16s. Some may also cite insurance problems. In view of increasing funding restrictions it is not safe to rely on being able to pick up ad hoc qualifications later.

Meetings between the Independent Schools Council, Education Otherwise and Home Education Advisory Service

Education Otherwise and the Home Education Advisory Service met with the ISC in January September and December 2008. A representative from DCSF Independent State Schools Partnership attended the first meeting.

Questionnaire sent out by ISC to schools on the AQA list Autumn 2008

A questionnaire was sent out by ISC in the Autumn using list of schools accepting private candidates supplied by AQA exam board. There were around 80 schools and just over half replied. 1 in 7 reported they hadn't had a private candidate and specified that this was because they hadn't received any applications, not because they had turned people away.

Feedback from the questionnaire

We looked more closely at the 1 in 7 schools who hadn't received any applications. We asked if they would be interested in accepting private candidates. 5 out of the 6 schools did not feel they wanted to change the situation and accept private candidates. We wondered what we could learn from the schools who had a positive working partnership with private candidates so that we could share this with other schools who were perhaps reluctant or apprehensive. We also wanted to find out from home educating families how much of a difference the help from the school had made to their lives.

Most schools took fewer than 5 candidates but 3 schools out of 40 reported that they had more than 10 private candidates. Three quarters of schools said numbers of private candidates had remained steady or had increased at their school.

Field trips to 2 schools taking more than 10 external candidates

After we had analysed the feedback from the questionnaires, Education Otherwise undertook field trips to two schools which had been identified as schools taking more than 10 private candidates for exams. One of the schools accepts home educators on an ad hoc individual basis; the other deals with a single home educating parent/tutor who sorts out all the paperwork for the tuition group and liaises with the school. The schools visited were Mayville, Portsmouth and Sidcot, near Bristol.

Main exam boards were AQA/Edexcel/OCR/WJEC

In terms of exam boards, since the schools were taken from the AQA list, all schools on the list were registered as centres for AQA which is also the most common exam board for home educated private candidates. Almost all schools who responded were also registered as centres with Edexcel and OCR. Half were registered as a centre for WJEC. Only 1 in 10 were registered as a centre for CIE.

IGCSEs and the issue of controlled assessments for GCSEs

It will be an increasing problem for home educated private candidates to sit GCSEs because of the issue of controlled assessments. Exams with an internal assessment component will be virtually impossible for external candidates, which is why many home educators are looking to IGCSEs. Half the schools who responded to the ISC questionnaire already offer IGCSEs. Education Otherwise and the Home Education Advisory Service have met with the government's exam regulators who have told home educators to "build on the relationship we have with the exam centres" in order to surmount the problem of controlled assessments in GCSEs. More information about our difficulties can be found here: <http://www.freedomforchildrentogrow.org/qca.htm>

SEN/Access Arrangements

Schools which had been surveyed by the ISC were already offering assistance for Access Arrangements and SEN but the candidates need to know in sufficient time and need to be able to sort out any necessary paperwork. In two thirds of situations home educated private candidates were invigilated alongside school pupils. In one third the home educated candidate was invigilated separately, either because of sitting a different exam or because of SEN requirements. A few candidates received assistance from the school with practical aspects of the exam such as laboratory work or oral exams. In a single case reported to the ISC via the questionnaire, a school was able to help with continuous assessment or project work requiring marking.

Where do we go from here?

As Jane says in her recent article for the ISC bulletin: "An extremely helpful move would be the creation of a list of schools that were willing to be included - perhaps with the name of a contact - as happy to accommodate private candidates. If schools on this list provided details of the awarding bodies with which they are registered, parents could then select appropriate specifications at an early stage for their home-educated child.

The fees that external candidates are charged vary widely. It would be ideal if there were an agreed common system of charges among schools so that parents could budget for the costs. The fees might be broken down into components for papers, practicals and assessments since not all of these elements will necessarily be involved in each home-educated candidate's exam."

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GCSE controlled assessments and what this means for home educators.

<http://www.freedomforchildrentogrow.org/qca.htm>

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