

House of Commons Debate on Home Education

The United Kingdom Parliament

House of Commons Hansard Debates, 13th May 2003

Mr. John Randall M.P. (Uxbridge): I most grateful for the opportunity to have this debate and to my constituent Fiona Berry, who first brought home education to my attention. Like the vast majority of people in the country, I was rather ignorant of home education, not to say slightly prejudiced about it.

In any free society, the freedom to choose the type of education that we want for our children is essential. Although there is much talk about the dangers of social exclusion, it is easy to see that a state system that insisted on total inclusion would not be free. We can be proud that that freedom was enshrined in our law long before the UN decided that it was an essential, in the convention on the rights of the child. We can also be proud that the number of families who have chosen to home educate in England has been growing for the past 30 years.

It may surprise hon. Members, as it surprised me, to learn that there is no such thing as a compulsory school age, despite the passion of the Department for Education and Skills for that phrase. The Education Act 1944 calls on all parents to ensure that their children are educated, but they are free to decide whether that should be at school or otherwise. Roughly 1 per cent. of the children in education in England and Wales are educated at home by their parents, whose reasons for doing so are as diverse as their families. Although the percentage is small, it represents a significant number of young people. I do not believe that there are accurate figures for the number of home-educating families in England and Wales. That lack of firm information perhaps reflects the free society in which we live. Parents are under no obligation to register with anyone or to notify the local education authority, as long as they continue to fulfil their obligations under section 7 of the 1944 Act to educate their children in a way that suits their ability, age and aptitude, by attendance at school or otherwise. The best guesses put the number of families that are currently home educating at 25,000 and the number of children who are being educated at home at 150,000.

One might ask why anyone would wish to home educate when a free state education system is available to all. There are as many answers to that question as there are families home educating. Some decided from the beginning that they preferred to continue to allow their children to learn in the natural way that they did in their pre-school years. Others began to home educate after withdrawing their children from school, perhaps because of bullying or school refusal, or sometimes because the child was over-stretched or even bored by the academic work. Some parents begin home education confident that they are making the best possible choice for their child, while others agonise over their abilities, but consider that they have no other option.

Despite the concerns of professional educators about the capabilities of home-educating parents, research indicates that it is hard to get it wrong. Whether parents use the national curriculum or no curriculum at all, whether they use formal methods or allow their children autonomy, whether children learn to read early or late, home-educated children outperform school children in studies that have been done in

England, the United States and Canada. Recent research has shown that the brain is aggressive and that children are natural learners. They are born wanting to learn. What surprises home educators is that in an information-rich culture our educational institutions sometimes manage to block that basic desire to learn successfully.

Home education offers many benefits for the families who do it. Learning becomes an integral part of everything, and takes place anywhere at anytime, not in special places at specific times. Once the compulsion is removed, children do not regard learning as work, but as a natural part of their lives. Children who are not segregated from their parents can become involved in their communities. Many families contribute significant amounts of time and energy to local projects.

The critics of home education sometimes refer to potential problems with socialisation, but research at the University of Michigan showed that home-educated children had no such problem. Perhaps that is because home-educating families take their children with them, and involve them in many social situations. Those children are, therefore, able to mix with people of all ages, and do not discriminate on the basis of age. In 2001, the Fraser Institute produced a comprehensive report into home education in the US and Canada. That report includes Professor Thomas Smedley's conclusion that:

"home-schooled students are more mature and better socialised than those who are sent to either public or private schools."

The term "public or private schools" is used in the American sense. Given those facts, it is rather strange that officialdom often lumps home-educated children into the same category as excluded or truanting children, or those in the care of the local authority. Assumptions are made about their behaviour, on the basis that children not in school are all the same. Home-educating families would maintain that their commitment to education and to the strength of their families, and their sense of social responsibility mean that officialdom has an uninformed way of thinking about electively home-educated children. The Fraser Institute report into home education in the US and Canada, where roughly 2.5 per cent. of children are home educated, concluded that home education provided a better education at a fraction of the cost of state education. The cost of home education is generally borne by the parents in the US, as is the case here. The report shows that those children out-performed schoolchildren, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

Dr. Paula Rothermel's study in England also showed that all children benefited from home education. Her report concluded that the children who did best were those from the lowest socio-economic group - turning the usual outcome of mainstream schools on its head. These days, parents are encouraged to respect their child's natural development in the early years. One advantage of home education is that it allows development to progress at a child's own pace, and ignores any notions of the average, or of targets. Some home-educated children learn to read at four. Many more learn later, sometimes as late as 10 or 11. One study showed that, by the age of 13, it was impossible to distinguish the age at which a child had learned to read. Indeed, a delay in the beginning of reading sometimes may have positive advantages, as the incidence of dyslexia and other problems is very much reduced among children who have been taught by autonomous methods.

A wide range of approaches may be adopted, ranging from running a school at home, with lessons and timetables, to topic-led studying, which takes a single subject as far as possible, to completely child-led, free-form methods, and every style in between. The education provided can be tailored to each child and each family, and take account of their talents and challenges.

For children who have been withdrawn from school due to bullying, or school refusal - something that many Members of Parliament come across in their weekly surgeries - the removal of any compulsion to attend is often all that is needed to solve the problem. Thus, it is rather astonishing and dismaying to know that many parents of extremely unhappy children remain in ignorance about their legal rights to provide home education. In some cases, parents have willingly gone to jail, rather than send a school-phobic child to school. It seems outrageous that - despite months of meetings and discussions with officials - in many cases, parents are not even informed about the option to deregister their child and home educate. In some cases, schools and education officials have encouraged parents to return children who are almost suicidal to school, rather than offer the information that home education is a legal alternative.

That misinformation extends from the constant repetition of the phrase that I mentioned at the beginning of my contribution, "compulsory school age", to legally incorrect information sent out with child benefit uprating letters. When home educators protested that it was not true that every parent had a legal duty to ensure that their children went to school, hurt disbelief that any home educator would so misunderstand the message of the leaflet was apparent in the apologies received from the Department. The problem was not that home educators would mistakenly rush to enrol their children in schools, nor that they would live in fear of arrest. The problem was that many parents who might one day need to know that home education was a legal and viable option were prevented from learning about it by a deliberate lie.

Those words may seem harsh, but, as reported in *The Sunday Times*, many home educators protested in autumn 2002 about the proposed wording of the leaflet. However, the same wrongly worded leaflet is still being sent out, so it seems that the misinformation must be deliberate. It is little wonder that the home-educated community has become officially invisible, subsumed as it is within a motley collection of exclusions and truants; it is being treated as if it belongs in the same category as the socially excluded and those totally disengaged from education.

In many cases, a lack of real information or knowledge about home education has resulted in the Government's not considering the impact of mainstream policies on home educators. Truancy patrols have been most entertaining in that respect, asking to see non-existent registration cards, or proof of home education that is impossible to produce. It is curious that home educators should see a vast amount of money expended on trying to herd school children back to school instead of on improvements in the attractiveness and desirability of the education on offer.

Another effect of mainstream policies - I hope that it is unintended - is that although the Government are avidly committed to keeping young people in learning, it appears that they are systematically denying the same access to those who are educated at home. In the past, home-educated children and young people could study for and obtain GCSE examinations as external candidates. They would incur the same cost as other children entered for exams externally - about £30 a subject. However, as the number of marks awarded for coursework has increased, the examination boards have become more reluctant to trust parents to supervise study for the exams.

Some families were able to get around that problem by studying for international GCSEs, but from June 2003 that avenue will no longer be open to home-educated students in the United Kingdom. The only options remaining for many parents are to employ supervising tutors, to spend a lot of money on GCSE correspondence courses at between

£200 and £300 a subject, or to obtain places at colleges of further education for children under the age of 16.

We readily understand that many home-educated families exist on lower incomes because of the need for one parent to stay at home. The families do not complain about that because it is their free choice. However, it seems extremely unfair that, having made those financial sacrifices to facilitate their children's education, parents should find themselves discriminated against when trying to gain access to college courses.

Some parents who have applied for places at colleges for their children to study GCSEs or vocational courses have been told that places are available at bargain rates for senior citizens and the unemployed and that they are free for children over 16 who meet the entry requirements, but that a charge of £1,800 per subject is made for home educated children under 16. However, some parents, who were nevertheless ready and willing to pay that £1,800 per subject, have been told that a college can accept only LEA money for children under 16.

As for many things in today's world, a postcode lottery is in operation; parents in some areas find it easier to get places and funding for colleges courses, while others find it impossible. It is rarely possible to obtain LEA funding for home-educated children, and LEAs often state that they receive no funding for those children whose parents have chosen to home educate. The funding guidance for further education is not so sure, however, stating that LEAs receive funding for children educated otherwise. Perhaps there is some confusion between children educated electively by their parents and children educated otherwise by the LEA. It would be good to know.

The same document explains that the Learning and Skills Council may, in rare cases, provide funding for courses for learners of compulsory school age - there is that phrase again - but the guidance goes on to say that *"the Secretary of State would expect the Council to exercise its power . . . only in exceptional circumstances"* and that the figures *"do not allow for any general expansion in the number of learners under 16."*

That seems odd. It is almost as though our education system prefers home-educated children to slow down or give up on studying before reaching the magical age of 16, even if they are ready and willing to apply themselves to obtaining qualifications. Some families thus find that a college will say that no places are available to home-educated children under 16, while maintaining blocks of places for allocation to young people who have been permanently excluded for serious misbehaviour. It is odd that kicking one's headmaster might gain one a free college place at 14, but studying hard at home for 10 years does not, and it is strange that a Government who, rightly, promote the value of, and access to, lifelong learning, and put considerable resources into keeping young people in learning should deny such things to a community that values education so highly.

I know that home educators do not ask for special consideration; they are certainly not asking for large resources to be assigned to counting and controlling. The Fraser Institute report for Canada and the United States, where it was possible to contrast results in strictly regulated states with those in unregulated ones, concluded that spending money on regulation made no difference to the level of achievement of home-educated children; they performed at the 85th centile, compared with the 50th centile for schooled children.

All that home educators want is for the Government to acknowledge that the law makes education, not school, compulsory; for accurate information about home education to be given freely to all parents; and for access to GCSEs and facilities in colleges to be available to home-educated children as they are to others in our country.

We are in a new millennium; the information age is upon us. Lifelong learning is not just a possibility but an essential tool for survival in a society in which frequent job changes will be the norm. Home

educators are leading the way, preparing their children for a future in which learning is a continuing part of their lives. Home education is not for everyone; the mainstream education system is there for all. However, I should like the result of this debate to be that the issues have been aired, the Minister has heard them and home educators are able to compete on an even playing field.

Don Glines on Algebra

Don Glines, you have said that no one needs to learn Algebra. Why do you believe that? Are there other required subjects you think not all of us need to learn?

No one needs a separate course in Algebra. Innovative educators tossed it out in the 60s. Algebra is just one of those political hangovers like Latin. For decades people felt that Latin was essential for college and life success; therefore it was promoted or required until the Latin teachers retired. Algebra is also obsolete. Maths should not be taught as maths, but as part of a larger systems approach. For engineer-type students, concepts from the old algebra, geometry, trig, calculus that may be needed by them, should be taught at the appropriate moment, not one year at a time as separate courses just to be ready for the next class. No one else needs engineering topics.

It is only being required/pushed now for political reasons. In the past, college prep students took algebra; non-college took business or general maths. When the push came to give minorities equal opportunity, what could be better than to say, if all students take algebra, they have equal opportunity to enter college. If we must teach algebra, we know gifted maths students can learn it in six weeks; however, many college prep sociology majors need 50 weeks. Yet for uniformity, we insist on 36-week classes for everyone, even though only 3 of the 30 students fit that pattern. The others need more or less time.

The traditional required curriculum for most schools and states fits no one, yet we pretend to be concerned for the welfare of each and every student.

Who needs to know integers? Who needs to figure out $x-y-2-(6)+3=Z$? Engineers don't need more algebra; they need courses in Common Sense. Look at the on/off ramp freeway snarls they created in major cities. People have forgotten the Guilford Studies (by a professor at USC) on IQs, in which he indicated there were probably 120 individual IQs - not just one composite - for each person. He had documented over 50 of them as early as the 1960s. In maths alone, there were at least 5 IQs. A student could have '120' score in Numerical Computation, but could have only a '90' in Abstract Reasoning or Spatial Relations - thus creating havoc with algebra and geometry requirements. ...

It is lucky schools do not teach the complicated skills of

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walking and talking (some in 2 or 3 languages) as they do reading, for if they did, look at all the remedial talking classes we would have to schedule. Algebra falls in the same category. No amount of remedial algebra will overcome the Guilford findings.

Beyond algebra, there are no classes that need to be required. The only crucial items are related to health and safety (don't put your finger in the fire, or drink poison). Reading is not even essential (the blind person who cannot use braille can be the most intelligent through talking books). Group-paced separate departments, courses, classes are wrong - teaching can and must be personalized and individualized. But if classes are required, home economics is the most important - not cooking/sewing, but child growth and development, interpersonal relations, and parenting.

The *Eight Year Study* proved conclusively that it makes no difference at all what classes are taken in high school related to success in college, success in *life*, success at work.

In fact, the students from the schools deviating the most from traditional requirements had the best success. The 'gooney birds' came out better than those who followed the traditional structure.

The famous Wilson Campus School at Minnesota State University Mankato, a state-funded K-12 research and development centre, re-affirmed these findings for all grade levels during the 60s and 70s. Wilson had no required classes, no separate courses, no grade levels, no report cards, no required tests, and no homework. An interdependent curriculum was featured; everything was personalized and individualised. Yet as part of a state department evaluation, Wilson had the highest test scores, best attendance rates, and fewest discipline problems of any school in Mankato - all achieved with a cross-section of Minnesota students.

It is lucky schools do not teach the complicated skills of walking and talking (some in 2 or 3 languages) as they do reading, for if they did, look at all the remedial talking classes we would have to schedule.

We can divide the 'need to know' into 5 categories. (1) There are only a few things one **must know** (safety factors); (2) many things **nice to know** (reading); (3) others that some need to **know** (building a bridge); (4) items **only a few need to know** (repair a refrigerator); and (5) very few items **only needed by specialists** (stars in the Milky Way). The traditional required curriculum for most schools and states fits no one, yet we pretend to be concerned for the welfare of each and every student.

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Don Glines is director of the Educational

**This is an extract from an interview with Don for
Paths of Learning Journal, 2003**

Book review

Dorothy Heathcote's Story:

Biography of a remarkable drama teacher

by Gavin Bolton

Trentham Books £16-99

Reading this book has been an emotional experience for me and has affected my thinking on many levels. It is a very readable book and I can only qualify this by admitting to you that I do not often read education books in one sitting. Let's face it many books about education are dull reading – except of course *Education Now* books and Gavin's book about Dorothy's life which I read with high levels of interest in a short space of time, from me this is big praise!

Ah, I hear you say, but Gavin's book is a biography not an education book! Oh no it's not, is my reply.

Dorothy Heathcote's biography contains important universal lessons about learning and teaching and despite too many years of initiatives that apparently have raised achievement in schools we still need to grasp her basic messages if we are to make education work for all our children. As Gavin brings to life the world as seen by Dorothy Heathcote we are introduced to a number of educational issues.

First, there are the issues of social class and culture that were a dominant influence on the young Dorothy, through her experiences we begin to get a sense of the different perspectives a person can get from their position in society. In her teaching she demonstrated a very real respect for her students whether they were young or old, and freed many children from the negative labels they had been given in classrooms by expecting that everyone can be enabled to learn.

She is undoubtedly a positivist who encourages useful activity and harnessing of energies to produce something of worth, but the something of worth can be negotiated it does not have to be pre set outcomes. It is this artistic understanding that something useful can be made from simply connecting ideas that leaves the teacher free to work with the cultural experiences of the students.

Secondly, her story raises and answers questions about teacher – student relationships with examples of how Dorothy personalised learning by supporting students in many different ways including befriending them and giving them a place to stay in her home when necessary. The message I read here is about valuing other people,

mutual respect and maintaining the human touch in all relationships.

Thirdly, there is something to be said for people who have a passion for something, a quality sadly lacking in today's teaching profession. (Yes I know we do not have time for personal interests we are all too busy writing our lesson objectives or marking test papers!) But you see Dorothy's love of drama lead her to take risks personally and professionally, which is a truly important aspect of any learning process. These days no one is allowed to 'fail', we all have to meet targets and objectives in a neat and tidy way and in the shortest space of time possible. Why am I taking a sideswipe at neat and tidy? Because creativity has many forms and being more random and untidy is one of them and frankly very undervalued at present.

Gavin asserts that Dorothy has no truck with the idea of failing either but regards every experience as giving her new insights, she despairs that "*education is to be a waiting room not a laboratory*". Gavin does explain that the vision of laboratory she is referring to is one where real experiments are taking place not where the students are sitting in rows making notes or filling in worksheets! Many *Education Now* readers will agree with her that children spend too much time waiting for the day when the teachers will decide they are knowledgeable enough and skilled enough to do the learning for themselves.

The final important message in this biography is about personal strengths. Dorothy Heathcote is a remarkable teacher because she did not just fit in with the current pedagogical ideas of her time she challenged them. Maybe, as Gavin muses in the opening chapters this is because she never had any formal teacher training and maybe it is because she was an artist on a journey of discovery. Whatever the case she has had to endure some pretty stiff criticism of her work and some rather nasty academic snobbery along the way.

Dorothy has had the strength of character to withstand these criticisms and the goodness of heart to keep trying to do the best for her students. I think her remarkable qualities will ensure that Dorothy Heathcote will be remembered as a truly innovative educationalist.

So in conclusion, there are plenty of useful messages to reflect upon – just as there are in all good, well told stories. My emotions are stirred by these messages and also because this book is a historical document in many ways. It is interesting to see how the battle to have drama valued as a learning medium has progressed over the years. Knowing some of the people who have contributed comments to this book I have cast my mind back to days when as a young Advisory Teacher for Drama in Birmingham they were very influential on my thinking.

Maybe this book is a timely reminder that those of us who have been privileged to train and work with Dorothy's methods, should increase our efforts to bring about greater recognition of the importance of drama in the curriculum.

Sharon Ginnis

Freelance Consultant and Trainer

Book review

Revolution Within:

a manifesto towards freedom

by Sammy Kunina

Praxis Publications £8-00, ISBN 0-9545-062-0-0

One of my weaknesses is for books of quotations. Quotes are somewhat like soundbites of poetry and they appeal to people like me who think that many poets do go on a bit. *Revolution Within* is a book full of quotations, many from Sammy herself. This inevitably means that there is some repetition, but you may find that acceptable since the ideas and themes are intertwined and stimulating.

Feminism, freedom, autonomy, and childism are four central themes. On feminism, one of my top quotes books is *Women in Quotes* where Simone de Beauvoir declares that "No one is born a woman". If being a woman, a child or a man is learned, there is hope, for we can change learning systems. Sammy certainly thinks change is necessary, for men get a bad press:

"... men's power does exist and impact, subtly and hugely on women's and children's lives ... The families who have sustained and inspired and ongoing commitment to their children's freedom are only those where the women live without men, or where the woman has expected and the man has embraced, his responsibility to reject power abuse." (pp.99-100)

The book starts with a plea for a life that does no harm, and then breaks into a catalogue of ways in which childism does great harm:

"Childism: a form of social control and political rule to conform children into unfree adults, to mould children to their parent's and society's need for compliance, often through the subtle coercion of mothers as agents of male power ..." (p.2-3)

The consequences are that:

"The oppression of children feeds into the subjugation of every oppressed group. Childhood is the grooming ground for the victimised and the violators." (p.9)

There are echoes of Alice Miller here and also of Annie Clegg's doctoral thesis that *Education Now* 'News and Review' no. 34, Winter 2001, carried as a Feature Supplement.

By page 12 we are wading in the tricky waters of freedom and discipline. Unless you distinguish amongst

authoritarian, autonomous and democratic forms of discipline, you can be in trouble here. Autonomy without some concept of self-discipline can soon be license. Russell proposed that freedom was predicated on good habits and that without these you were likely to be enslaved to bad ones.

Democratic discipline requires both the absence of domination **and** the agreement to observe the human rights and responsibilities package deal – you cannot have one without the other. Which is why burglars have forfeited their human rights by shunning the responsibility to avoid doing harm to others.

Childhood gets a good press in Sammy's book, but I think John Holt made a crucial contribution in *Escape from Childhood* where he proposed that many children want to escape childhood as soon as possible, not least because it is a state of powerlessness. He got into trouble suggesting that children who wanted it, should have the vote and also be able to drive as soon as they could demonstrate competence. Nelson Mandela also got into trouble suggesting that South Africans should have the vote at twelve since many children had given their lives to the cause of freedom, fighting Apartheid.

Play also gets a good press: "*Play is an integral part of childhood: Childhood is playhood.*" (p.20) But Annie Clegg noted that her grandchild, after a refreshment break, announced that she "*must get back to her play-work now*". Perhaps we should not juxtapose play with work, and instead see play as children's work in exploring and making sense of the world. Play-work is not limited to children – creative adults need it too.

Compulsory schooling is tried and found guilty:

"Compulsory schooling, imposed education of any sort, is a systematic mechanism for the repression of children's rights, humanity and spirit. Its existence serves to mould children to society's need for compliance." (p.21)

Well I agree with that, and so did George Bernard Shaw, Ivan Illich, John Holt and Paul Goodman. Which brings me to what I see as a weakness of the book in not quoting supporting voices enough. Without this device, the charge of 'this is just a personal rant' sounds that bit more plausible.

You will encounter some Anglo Saxon four letter words in this book, so if this worries you, brace yourself. But do not let it put you off. I have had to read countless books on education over the years. Only a few have been worth the effort – those that provoke you into dialogue and provide some new thoughts and insights.

"Fundamentally, there is no right education except growing up into a worthwhile world. Indeed, our excessive concern with problems of education at present simply means that the grown-ups do not have such a world." (Paul Goodman in *Compulsory Mis-education*).

Sammy's book readdresses both issues – our spiritually impoverished world and its destructive attempts at education. Read, enjoy and argue!

Roland Meighan

Flotsam and Jetsam

Stand and deliver!

"Oh dear, yet another strategy for teachers to 'deliver'. This time schools are to be sent an 80 page package explaining how to produce 'enjoyment' in the classroom. How many more strategies will be foisted on initiative-weary schools before this government learns, from the word of W.B. Yeats, that 'education is the lighting of a fire not filling buckets'. It is not a commodity that can be 'delivered'. The presence of this word in any utterance about education is a sign that the source understands nothing about it and that the result will be devoid of all joy and spontaneous creativity."

Roger Titcombe, Ulverston, Cumbria, letter in the *Guardian* 23rd May 2003

(And then there is also that absurd adult invention for bullying young learners into conformity – 'Key Stages' ...)

SATS and league tables watch

"... lets face it, without SATS we would have no way of discovering which schools are concentrating on SATS. We'd never know that those middle class kids at the village school in Surrey were doing much better than children who had English as a second language in that run-down estate in Tower Hamlets. This is surely the point of academic league tables. Parents of posh kids got fed up with their kids losing football matches 13-0 to the tough boys from the school on the estate so another league table was devised where they wouldn't always come last."

John O'Farrell in the *Guardian*, 9th May 2003

"... the real, dead thing we call British education"

"Beyond the canvass lies the real dead thing we call British education ... The British state, for most of its history, has taken little interest in education, seeing it as something for the churches or private individuals to establish and run their own schools. When the state did take an interest in education it did so out of fear ... the classic liberal fear that a divided society with a chasm between the propertied and the poor would end in revolution ... H.L. Bellairs ... expresses the establishment view succinctly: 'A band of efficient schoolmasters is kept at a much less expense than a body of police or soldiery'. ... And the Tomlinson neurosis about needing to get everybody somehow to do the same thing is the latest sad chapter in the history of an illusion."

Hwyel Williams, 'Cheaper than the police' the *Guardian*, 23rd July 2002

(John Holt proposed that the main function of teachers was that of 'cops without uniforms'.)

Bullying watch

"An 11 year-old boy has killed himself with an overdose of painkillers because he was being bullied in the latest in a spate of similar incidents involving schoolchildren ..."

"Last month a 15 year-old girl and a 16 year-old boy from Hirst school in Ashington, Northumberland, were found dead within a fortnight of each other after they took overdoses of painkillers."

"A week later a nine-year-old girl from Ripon, North Yorkshire said she thought of killing herself after she was bullied for two years by a classmate."

In the *Guardian*, 4th July 2003

(Estimates of the annual total of suicides by schoolchildren range from 50 to 100)

Arson watch

"Arson attacks on school buildings by bored and disaffected pupils are costing millions of pounds and endangering the lives of children, teachers, and firefighters, the insurance industry claim ... Schools suffer an average of 20 arson attacks a day according to the Association of British Insurers..."

In the *Guardian*, 10th June 2003

Flexischooling by default not by design?

"A Yorkshire council warned yesterday that it could lose up to 100 teaching jobs and put schools on a four-day week next term as a result of the funding crisis which has created a £4m 'black hole' in its educational budget."

In the *Guardian*, 4th June 2003

Weapons watch

"Nearly one in ten secondary schools has caught pupils bringing guns into the classroom, a survey has found. SecEd, a new weekly newspaper for secondary teachers received 160 replies from teachers to a questionnaire on weapons in school. More than 40% said that pupils carried knives in their schools ..."

Times Educational Supplement, 4th April 2003

Teaching as a punishing option?

"A Spanish prosecutor has requested that an alleged hacker should teach 100 hours of computer classes as a punishment."

The *Guardian* 19th May 2003

Gullibility watch

"St. Mark's CE school in Brighton, East Sussex, was closed yesterday while a seagull nest and three chicks were removed to a wildlife sanctuary. The adult gulls were deemed a risk after diving on staff."

The *Guardian* 12th June 2003

Alphabet soup and international league tables

"Real progress will not be made until we accept that English is an inefficient alphabetic language, and will always require more time and energy, and a larger rate of failure, when compared with most other languages."

Ken Spencer, letter in the *Observer* 17th March 2003

The Great Leap Backwards?

"My wife and I trained in England during the 1960s and have spent most of our careers overseas. We returned to England last year with the intention of teaching for two years on home soil before retiring. We will be lucky to see out the school year. This is the worst curriculum system we have faced in 38 years ... It needs to be binned before the statistics on the departure of teachers become even worse."

David McManus, letter in the *Sunday Times* 2nd Feb 2003

William and 'uninvited teaching'?

"For a time, William walked in silence and Mr. Cranthorpe-Cranborough talked. He talked about the glorious historical monument of England and the joys of early rising and the fascination of decimals ... and the beauty of foreign languages. He warmed to William as he talked, for William seemed to be drinking in his word almost avidly. William's solemn eyes

never left his face. He could not know that William was not listening to a word he said but was engaged in trying to count his teeth ...

Educational Beachcomber

News ... News ... News ...

It's goodbye to her, and goodbye to him ...

Janet and Roland Meighan have decided that this will be their last year as secretary and treasurer of *Education Now*. The directors met and concluded that there was no likelihood of anyone taking on these two tasks which constitute one full-time job, without pay.

It was felt that the time may have come for the metamorphosis (i.e. merger) of *Education Now* into its creation, *The Centre for Personalised Education Trust (CPE)*. At the AGM in September the directors will present a metamorphosis procedure and merger plan.

This will provide for all current money and future income from book sales to *Education Now* to be used to (a) pay off existing liabilities, and (b) pass any remaining surplus to *CPE* to further its work.

Janet and Roland are willing to implement the plan, including the production and distribution of the final three editions of *News and Review* – that is until the end of the current subscription year ending June 30th 2004. A high proportion of *Education Now* members are already joint members of both organisations – personalised education within a democratic framework appears to have considerable appeal. This, of course, has always been a central part of the *Education Now* agenda.

CPE Trustees have been made aware of the situation and will be willing to develop a membership facility with a Newsletter twice a year and a more modest *News and Review* twice a year edited by Chris Shute. Janet and Roland will continue to work within *CPE*. The Trustees will also try to organise an annual conference for members. *Educational Heretics Press* has offered to be agents for the sale of the remaining *Education Now* Books at a 10% commission after all necessary costs of postage, packaging etc., are met.

And it's goodbye to them...

Philip and Annabel Toogood are off to Andalusia in September to run an all-age Language School. But they will be back from time to time since they are keeping on their house in Melbourne, Derbyshire! Annabel hopes to find time for some drawing, painting and illustrating as well as working with the youngest children.

Congratulations to Education Now

Congratulations on 15 years of consistent, intelligent commentary.

Dave Harvey Smith

Conference Reminder

The Centre for Personalised Education Conference will be held at the *Planned Environment Therapy Trust Conference Centre* in Toddington, Gloucestershire on 11th (12th) October. Details from Janet at the usual address.

Sunday 21st September 2003

Learning Exchange and A.G.M.

Spotlighting 'Creativity'

The next **Learning Exchange** and AGM will take place on **Sunday 21st September** at **Burleigh Community College, Loughborough**. The event will begin at **11.30 with the AGM**. This will be followed by the **Learning Exchange at 1.45**. A lunch break will be taken prior to the afternoon discussion.

Member, Paul Scott and his son, Tommy, (home educated, twenty-year-old piano virtuoso) will be performing some of their jazz, ***Music For The Heart...And Head***, at the *Learning Exchange*. Paul is a bassist and educator whose latest project uses musical improvisation to help explore issues relating to creativity, and to examine how 'thinking tools' can improve and enrich the lives of both children and adults alike. The duo will be playing compositions from their forthcoming CD entitled '*Future Positive*', which celebrates the work of creativity guru Edward de Bono. This will be followed by a consideration of other dimensions of creativity – ***A Space to Grow*** – presented by Michael Foot and Peter Holt. Our discussion should be enhanced by this wealth of stimulation!

Members and friends of *Education Now* are invited to this event, which is **Free of Charge**. (A voluntary collection will offset cost of drinks) Members and friends are asked to bring their own lunches, although drinks will be provided.

(If you would like to attend contact Janet Meighan at 113 Arundel Drive, Bramcote Hills, Nottingham NG9 3FQ
telephone 0115 925 7261)

Conference: 'Small School – Big Future'

3rd October 2003

at Stourport Manor, Stourport, Worcestershire

Cost is £80 per person

Organised by Worcestershir LEA, Human Scale Education, Small Schools Association and National Small Schools Forum.

Contact Polly Stewart-Maggs at Human Scale Education Telephone: 01275 332516 e-mail info@hse.org.uk

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Understanding and working for children's rights

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Course leader Dr Liz Brooker, telephone 020 7612 6665

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Membership of *Education Now* costs £20 per year (joint with *CPE* £25). In return members receive four issues of *News and Review* and information about new books, *Learning Exchanges* etc.

Printed by Mastaprint Plus

***Education Now* Damage limitation: the learners' point of view on surviving the schooling system**

The United Kingdom Parliament

House of Commons Hansard Debates for 13th May 2003 at 4-00 p.m.

Home Education

Mr. John Randall M.P. (Uxbridge): I am most grateful for the opportunity to have this debate and to my constituent Fiona Berry, who first brought home education to my attention. Like the vast majority of people in the country, I was rather ignorant of home education, not to say slightly prejudiced about it. In any free society, the freedom to choose the type of education that we want for our children is essential. Although there is much talk about the dangers of social exclusion, it is easy to see that a state system that insisted on total inclusion would not be free. We can be proud that that freedom was enshrined in our law long before the UN decided that it was an essential, in the convention on the rights of the child. We can also be proud that the number of families who have chosen to home educate in England has been growing for the past 30 years. It may surprise hon. Members, as it surprised me, to learn that there is no such thing as a compulsory school age, despite the passion of the Department for Education and Skills for that phrase. The Education Act 1944 calls on all parents to ensure that their children are educated, but they are free to decide whether that should be at school or otherwise. Roughly 1 per cent. of the children in education in England and Wales are educated at home by their parents, whose reasons for doing so are as diverse as their families. Although the percentage is small, it represents a significant number of young people. I do not believe that there are accurate figures for the number of home-educating families in England and Wales. That lack of firm information perhaps reflects the free society in which we live. Parents are under no obligation to register with anyone or to notify the local education authority, as long as they continue to fulfil their obligations under section 7 of the 1944 Act to educate their children in a way that suits their ability, age and aptitude, by attendance at school or otherwise. The best guesses put the number of families that are currently home educating at 25,000 and the number of children who are being educated at home at 150,000.

One might ask why anyone would wish to home educate when a free state education system is available to all. There are as many answers to that question as there are families home educating. Some decided from the beginning that they preferred to continue to allow their children to learn in the natural way that they did in their pre-school years. Others began to home educate after withdrawing their children from school, perhaps because of bullying or school refusal, or sometimes because the child was over-stretched or even bored by the academic work. Some parents begin home education confident that they are making the best possible choice for their child, while others agonise over their abilities, but consider that they have no other option.

Despite the concerns of professional educators about the capabilities of home-educating parents, research indicates that it is hard to get it wrong. Whether parents use the national curriculum or no curriculum at all, whether they use formal methods or allow their children autonomy, whether children learn to read early or late, home-educated children outperform school children in studies that have been done in England, the United States and Canada. Recent research has shown that the brain is aggressive and that children are natural learners. They are born wanting to learn. What surprises home educators is that in an information-rich culture our educational institutions sometimes manage to block that basic desire to learn successfully.

Home education offers many benefits for the families who do it. Learning becomes an integral part of everything, and takes place anywhere at anytime, not in special places at specific times. Once the compulsion is removed, children do not regard learning as work, but as a natural part of their lives. Children who are not segregated from their parents can become involved in their communities. Many families contribute significant amounts of time and energy to local projects.

The critics of home education sometimes refer to potential problems with socialisation, but research at the University of Michigan showed that home-educated children had no such problem. Perhaps that is because home-educating families take their children with them, and involve them in many social situations. Those children are, therefore, able to mix with people of all ages, and do not discriminate on the basis of age. In 2001, the Fraser Institute produced a comprehensive report into home education in the US and Canada. That report includes Professor Thomas Smedley's conclusion that:

"home-schooled students are more mature and better socialised than those who are sent to either public or private schools."

The term "public or private schools" is used in the American sense.

Given those facts, it is rather strange that officialdom often lumps home-educated children into the same category as excluded or truanting children, or those in the care of the local authority. Assumptions are made about their behaviour, on the basis that children not in school are all the same. Home-educating families would maintain that their commitment to education and to the strength of their families, and their sense of social responsibility mean that officialdom has an uninformed way of thinking about electively home-educated children. The Fraser Institute report into home education in the US and Canada, where roughly 2.5 per cent. of children are home educated, concluded that home education provided a better education at a fraction of the cost of state education. The cost of home education is generally borne by the parents in the US, as is the case here. The report shows that those children out-performed schoolchildren, irrespective of their socio-economic background.

Dr. Paula Rothermel's study in England also showed that all children benefited from home education. Her report concluded that the children who did best were those from the lowest socio-economic group—turning the usual outcome of mainstream schools on its head. These days, parents are encouraged to respect their child's natural development in the early years. One advantage of home education is that it allows development to progress at a child's own pace, and ignores any notions of the average, or of targets. Some home-educated children learn to read at four. Many more learn later, sometimes as late as 10 or 11. One study showed that, by the age of 13, it was impossible to distinguish the age at which a

child had learned to read. Indeed, a delay in the beginning of reading sometimes may have positive advantages, as the incidence of dyslexia and other problems is very much reduced among children who have been taught by autonomous methods.

A wide range of approaches may be adopted, ranging from running a school at home, with lessons and timetables, to topic-led studying, which takes a single subject as far as possible, to completely child-led, free-form methods, and every style in between. The education provided can be tailored to each child and each family, and take account of their talents and challenges.

For children who have been withdrawn from school due to bullying, or school refusal—something that many Members of Parliament come across in their weekly surgeries—the removal of any compulsion to attend is often all that is needed to solve the problem. Thus, it is rather astonishing and dismaying to know that many parents of extremely unhappy children remain in ignorance about their legal rights to provide home education. In some cases, parents have willingly gone to jail, rather than send a school-phobic child to school. It seems outrageous that—despite months of meetings and discussions with officials—in many cases, parents are not even informed about the option to deregister their child and home educate. In some cases, schools and education officials have encouraged parents to return children who are almost suicidal to school, rather than offer the information that home education is a legal alternative. That misinformation extends from the constant repetition of the phrase that I mentioned at the beginning of my contribution, "compulsory school age", to legally incorrect information sent out with child benefit uprating letters. When home educators protested that it was not true that every parent had a legal duty to ensure that their children went to school, hurt disbelief that any home educator would so misunderstand the message of the leaflet was apparent in the apologies received from the Department. The problem was not that home educators would mistakenly rush to enrol their children in schools, nor that they would live in fear of arrest. The problem was that many parents who might one day need to know that home education was a legal and viable option were prevented from learning about it by a deliberate lie.

Those words may seem harsh, but, as reported in *The Sunday Times*, many home educators protested in autumn 2002 about the proposed wording of the leaflet. However, the same wrongly worded leaflet is still being sent out, so it seems that the misinformation must be deliberate. It is little wonder that the home-educated community has become officially invisible, subsumed as it is within a motley collection of exclusions and truants; it is being treated as if it belongs in the same category as the socially excluded and those totally disengaged from education.

In many cases, a lack of real information or knowledge about home education has resulted in the Government's not considering the impact of mainstream policies on home educators. Truancy patrols have been most entertaining in that respect, asking to see non-existent registration cards, or proof of home education that is impossible to produce. It is curious that home educators should see a vast amount of money expended on trying to herd school children back to school instead of on improvements in the attractiveness and desirability of the education on offer.

Another effect of mainstream policies—I hope that it is unintended—is that although the Government are avidly committed to keeping young people in learning, it appears that they are systematically denying the same access to those who

are educated at home. In the past, home-educated children and young people could study for and obtain GCSE examinations as external candidates. They would incur the same cost as other children entered for exams externally—about £30 a subject. However, as the number of marks awarded for coursework has increased, the examination boards have become more reluctant to trust parents to supervise study for the exams.

Some families were able to get around that problem by studying for international GCSEs, but from June 2003 that avenue will no longer be open to home-educated students in the United Kingdom. The only options remaining for many parents are to employ supervising tutors, to spend a lot of money on GCSE correspondence courses at between £200 and £300 a subject, or to obtain places at colleges of further education for children under the age of 16.

We readily understand that many home-educated families exist on lower incomes because of the need for one parent to stay at home. The families do not complain about that because it is their free choice. However, it seems extremely unfair that, having made those financial sacrifices to facilitate their children's education, parents should find themselves discriminated against when trying to gain access to college courses.

Some parents who have applied for places at colleges for their children to study GCSEs or vocational courses have been told that places are available at bargain rates for senior citizens and the unemployed and that they are free for children over 16 who meet the entry requirements, but that a charge of £1,800 per subject is made for home educated children under 16.

However, some parents, who were nevertheless ready and willing to pay that £1,800 per subject, have been told that a college can accept only LEA money for children under 16. As for many things in today's world, a postcode lottery is in operation; parents in some areas find it easier to get places and funding for colleges courses, while others find it impossible. It is rarely possible to obtain LEA funding for home-educated children, and LEAs often state that they receive no funding for those children whose parents have chosen to home educate. The funding guidance for further education is not so sure, however, stating that LEAs receive funding for children educated otherwise. Perhaps there is some confusion between children educated electively by their parents and children educated otherwise by the LEA. It would be good to know. The same document explains that the Learning and Skills Council may, in rare cases, provide funding for courses for learners of compulsory school age—there is that phrase again—but the guidance goes on to say that

"the Secretary of State would expect the Council to exercise its power . . . only in exceptional circumstances" and that the figures

"do not allow for any general expansion in the number of learners under 16."

That seems odd. It is almost as though our education system prefers home-educated children to slow down or give up on studying before reaching the magical age of 16, even if they are ready and willing to apply themselves to obtaining qualifications. Some families thus find that a college will say that no places are available to home-educated children under 16, while maintaining blocks of places for allocation to young people who have been permanently excluded for serious misbehaviour. It is odd that kicking one's headmaster might gain one a free college place at 14, but studying hard at home for 10 years does not, and it is strange that a Government who, rightly, promote the value of, and access to, lifelong learning, and put considerable resources into keeping young people in

learning should deny such things to a community that values education so highly.

I know that home educators do not ask for special consideration; they are certainly not asking for large resources to be assigned to counting and controlling. The Fraser Institute report for Canada and the United States, where it was possible to contrast results in strictly regulated states with those in unregulated ones, concluded that spending money on regulation made no difference to the level of achievement of home-educated children; they performed at the 85th centile, compared with the 50th centile for schooled children. All that home educators want is for the Government to acknowledge that the law makes education, not school, compulsory; for accurate information about home education to be given freely to all parents; and for access to GCSEs and facilities in colleges to be available to home-educated children as they are to others in our country.

We are in a new millennium; the information age is upon us. Lifelong learning is not just a possibility but an essential tool for survival in a society in which frequent job changes will be the norm. Home educators are leading the way, preparing their children for a future in which learning is a continuing part of their lives. Home education is not for everyone; the mainstream education system is there for all. However, I should like the result of this debate to be that the issues have been aired, the Minister has heard them and home educators are able to compete on an even playing field.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education and Skills (Mr. Ivan Lewis) : I congratulate the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) on having secured the debate. It is a good opportunity to shine a light on an issue that does not receive enough attention and to demonstrate—

4.17 pm

Sitting Suspended for a Division in the House.

4.37 pm

On resuming—

Mr. Lewis : I was congratulating the hon. Member for Uxbridge on securing a debate on such an important

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issue; we need to focus more on the issue than we have done in the past. I shall try to respond to his points constructively. If he wishes to ask further questions, I shall be happy to answer those later.

The basic position on home education in England can be summarised in a phrase; education is compulsory, schooling is not. That links into the hon. Gentleman's comments about the leaflet. When we realised that the wording could cause confusion, we clarified the matter and reprinted the leaflet. However, some old copies might still be in circulation. As the Minister responsible for behaviour and discipline in schools, I would not want any attempt to be made to undermine the message on truancy. It is a serious problem; too many parents actively collude and are involved in their children's truancy. The Government make no apology for being determined to stamp down on that. Truancy contributes to educational underperformance and has a direct bearing on street crime. I hope that there is a political consensus on the fact that truancy is bad; it undermines our objectives for education.

Mr. Randall : Of course there is consensus. The problem is that the home educators whom I have met would be the last people to be considered irresponsible. They find the way in which they are included in the same breath as truancy rather upsetting.

Mr. Lewis : This is an opportunity to clarify a simple point. Children who are enrolled on a school register are expected to be there unless they have authorised absence. If they are not there, that is truancy and we expect parents to co-operate with the system on that. Clearly, if the child is being educated at home according to the law—properly and in accordance with the basic standards—that is perfectly lawful. We do not see that as truancy and there is no ambiguity or confusion about that. I am sorry if parents sometimes feel that the language is a little unclear, and we shall endeavour to do whatever we can to clarify it and put an end to any ambiguities in that regard. It is the state's responsibility to provide for the education of children in schools. As an Education Minister, it is my belief that, for most pupils in most circumstances, school is the right place in which to receive an education. However, it is a fundamental right for parents to be free to educate their child at home if they so wish. As the hon. Gentleman has said, parents chose to home educate for various reasons. They might include religious, cultural or philosophical beliefs or the parents might simply take the view that home education works best for their children. Most of those children have never attended schools, so are never registered with the LEAs because there is no requirement for them to be. The hon. Gentleman made that point.

We accept that sometimes a decision to home educate might be prompted by particular circumstances or problems that arise during the course of a young person's school experience. A child might develop medical problems, or become school-phobic, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. I acknowledge that, in some cases, issues such as distance, access to local schools, dissatisfaction with the general education system or with an individual establishment, or bullying may be factors

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that lead a parent to choose home education. In all such circumstances, that should be a source of regret and a message to people at local and national level to take action. We do not want the school system to be such that a parent feels that they have no alternative but to remove their child from it. In the end, that represents a serious failure of the system.

This Government are doing a variety of things to address such concerns. We are providing learning mentors to help young people remove barriers to learning, and Connexions personal advisers to advise and guide young people and maintain their engagement. The new behaviour and education support teams bring together a wider range of child specialists to help children and families deal with problems. Our reform of the secondary curriculum, which seeks to introduce a more individualised learning experience for young people, is also important. The new modernised teaching profession that has been created is better engaged to manage behaviour and has more time to teach and to provide children and young people with the support and help that they need.

We recognise the need to reform the education system to minimise the number of children for whom being in a school environment is a negative experience. We recognise, too, that a whole variety of factors can contribute to that, including making the curriculum more relevant, reforming the teaching profession, using external advisers and improving relationships between what is happening at school and at home. Through such means, we are determined to make school as positive and

attractive as possible for young people and their parents. That is absolutely integral to our overall policy priority of reducing the number of young people who drop out of education at the age of 16 in this country. That is still a major problem and often happens because young people get turned off education far too early in their educational lives.

Turning to the legal situation, local authorities have a general responsibility to ensure that they make suitable provision for education in their area, although parents who educate at home are not required by law to be registered in any way, a point that the hon. Gentleman has made.

We welcome the fact—the hon. Gentleman should also welcome it—that local authorities can intervene if they have reason to believe that parents are not providing a suitable education. They also have the right to make reasonable inquiries to ensure that children withdrawn from school to be home educated are receiving what is deemed an appropriate education. It is right that they should continue to have that power.

Of course, local arrangements vary. Many local authorities contact home-educated pupils as soon as such pupils start to be educated at home and continue to contact them annually. LEAs do not have the legal right to enter a home or physically see a child, but it is the parent's responsibility to ensure that enough evidence is submitted to the LEA to satisfy it that the child is receiving a suitable education. Parents may choose to meet an LEA officer at home or at neutral location; that is roughly the right balance between the rights and responsibilities of parents and the state.

LEAs may decide to contact home-educated children or their parents more regularly if they are not fully satisfied that the child is receiving a suitable education.

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It is a question of balancing the right to freedom and individual choice with the state's responsibility and duty to ensure that an appropriate education is being secured. There are some circumstances in which an LEA may provide home tuition for pupils who cannot attend school because of, for example, sickness, exclusion, school phobia or teenage pregnancy.

Education is provided through home tutors and e-learning. E-learning allows schooling to be available through virtual communities and can be established in homes or in groups in libraries. We know that some of those projects can lead to children attaining significant national vocational qualifications. LEAs can pay directly for home tuition and the hon.

Gentleman will be pleased to know that the Department is providing some support for a project, notschool.net, that offers an IT-based education for disaffected children. The cost of the system amounts to £3,000 per year per pupil, which is broadly equivalent to the pupil cost in a mainstream school.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that LEAs have no legal duty to provide financial support for parents who home educate. Some LEAs provide free national curriculum materials or other forms of support to home-educating parents. That decision must continue to be made locally, so that any support fits with both the policies of individual LEAs and the needs of each child.

I will examine the hon. Gentleman's point about access by young people, particularly under-16s, to further education. The playing field should not be uneven and we should examine whether the system disadvantages young people who could benefit from placements in colleges in the further education system.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of numbers. Because not all home-educated children are registered with an LEA, we do

not have firm figures on how many of them there are.

However, some groups that work with parents of home educated-children have suggested that the number is between 50,000 and 100,000, and they claim that numbers are increasing.

Education provided at home must be efficient and appropriate to the age, ability and aptitude of the child. We accept and understand that parents adopt a wide variety of legitimate approaches. They have significant flexibility; for example, they are not required to teach the national curriculum or to have a timetable. Many parents who opt to home educate speak enthusiastically about the benefits that it provides. They cite the independence, the maturity and the keenness to learn that it can foster and the opportunity it provides for children to develop at a pace that suits them. As I said earlier, we respect their views. Other parents point to the high grades that some home-educated children achieve when they enter formal examinations. However, it is important to make this point; there has not been any independent and systematic evaluation at a national level of the overall quality of the education provided and the specific outcomes that it delivers for the children concerned.

My Department recognises and respects the right to choose to home educate. The circumstances of families and the needs of individual children will always vary and home education provides a route for parents to tailor and more directly to guide their children's learning, where they are particularly keen to do so. However, I am

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sure that the hon. Gentleman will agree that the learning potential and the welfare of the child must remain paramount. Positive relationships and mutual respect between the local authorities and the parents concerned are the best way to secure that aim, which we actively seek to encourage through our guidance and contacts with local authorities and parents. The Government believe that we must recognise the right to choose home education. For example, my Department provides general guidance on home education and parents' legal responsibilities on its

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website. The guidance also provides links to other useful information, including the national curriculum and assessment arrangements, and enables access to websites created by home educators. There is no question about the Government being negative or trying to impede home educators, whose contribution we value.

The matter is sensitive and there are many differences of view, but the main thing is the best interest of children. We need to pay more attention to the contribution that home educators make.

It being nine minutes to Five o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the sitting lapsed, without Question put.