

## The Link Between School Exclusion and Home Education

I run several websites about home education including one focusing on special educational needs. Parents get in touch with me via the contact form or by means of Facebook or Twitter or my blog.

A steady stream of enquiries deals with situations where the child keeps getting into trouble at school. There are more boys than girls in this situation and most have special educational needs. Parents won't have had any information about alternative provision or managed moves to another school so there is a lot of worry about the child being excluded. Typically, parents think it is a stark choice between home education or the Pupil Referral Unit. With reference to the PRU, parents may be worried about the stigma or about negative peer influence. Sometimes the school will directly say that home education is the answer, or will imply that exclusion is imminent and inevitable and leave parents to form their own conclusions.

This has been termed covert exclusion or offrolling or coerced deregistration and I have heard people say that it is very difficult to track or prove. However, it seems to me that it would be a simple matter for the council to provide a breakdown (to the Department for Education and to Ofsted) for all pupils in each year group removed from all schools in their area for home education. This would not be an additional burden as councils could reasonably be expected to have this information already. A high number of 14/15 year olds leaving a particular school for home education could be the trigger for further scrutiny. There may be nothing amiss but it would be worth taking it up with parents and asking more about the circumstances.

For a parent who wants to jump before they are pushed, it's impossible to judge how close a child is to being permanently excluded, sometimes parents will say they think the child has turned a corner, only to find they are then permanently excluded, while at other times they will pull children out after internal exclusion but before the child has ever had a fixed period exclusion, because they fear the worst. Schools are only allowed to exclude for so many days in a school year but this doesn't mean there is an allowance to be used up before the school can trigger permanent exclusion.

It's extremely difficult for parents to find a school place for young people once GCSEs have started. But in some cases it would only be where a child or young person had been excluded several times that the Fair Access Protocol might apply for in year admissions, so parents who take children out before exclusion might actually be reducing their chance of a school place in future.

Home education can also follow on from permanent exclusion. One parent commented on my blog *"The council just never provided any education after permanent exclusion, despite saying they were going to, they kept putting it off, saying it was half term, it would be sorted out after, then Easter term, then still no provision, so I contacted the Ombudsman, the council then did offer another mainstream placement, but my child is too anxious, and doesn't want to go back to a different school, as been at home for eight months, now my only option is home education, it was suggested by LA, I met with the elective home education officer"*

Parents ask me who they have to tell about home education and who will check on what they are doing. At the same time they are worried about who will do the teaching for the remainder of the child's GCSEs and they want advice on finding a tutor.

I have to break the news that even if parents can afford to pay for a tutor, this won't solve the problem for GCSEs of the child not being on roll. Children who are outside the system are classed as external or private candidates, and generally can't take GCSEs except in a very few subjects

However, parents sometimes say to me that their child has missed so much that there's no chance

they'll pass exams if they stay in school anyway. This is particularly true where pupils are segregated from classmates but remain on site.

Ofsted should be taking a hard look at internal exclusion and what actually happens to pupils who are repeatedly parked out of lessons or sent to an on-site unit. The school might be able to justify this on behavioural grounds but if there isn't a proper plan for the child's education during internal exclusion or if reintegration does not provide an opportunity for the pupil to catch up on any work missed, the school should be held to account for the effect on the child's education.

Parents feel powerless when it comes to getting headteachers to change their mind about permanent exclusion. Parents tell me there isn't much point complaining to the School Governors about exclusion because the governing body will always back up the headteacher. (We don't have statistics on permanent exclusions which were overturned at the governing body stage since effectively the exclusion decision is reversed.)

Where parents take their case to an Independent Review Panel hardly any pupils are offered their place back, and in any event, this might not even be what parents want. Sometimes parents want the school to be told it has let their child down. In other cases parents might be appealing because they want the exclusion removed from the record. In my experience parents are very upset about exclusion being on the record, also about what they perceive to be the stigma of having been at the Pupil Referral Unit.

The role of the SEN expert is limited to giving a view on how SEN might be relevant to the pupil's exclusion. The SEN expert doesn't carry out an assessment of the child's special needs or tell the school that it must make more allowances.

In theory parents can take an exclusion case to the disability discrimination tribunal although in practice this hardly ever happens. Last year there were only 5 cases about permanent exclusion and 4 cases concerning fixed period exclusion. Grounds for permanent exclusion are to do with breaches of the school's disciplinary policy ie for "behaviour" but even where the parent is able to show that the disability or special educational need is the "cause" of the behaviour, this doesn't necessarily mean that the school has acted in a discriminatory way.