



The home education charity
educationotherwise.org

Wales: why parents choose home education



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Executive summary

Elective Home Education (EHE) is of equal legal status to school education, it is a reasonable and legal choice to make and it is not a safeguarding risk. Notwithstanding, the Education Minister Jeremy Miles, has made clear his view that the best place for every child is in school. Many parents do not agree with that statement.

The Minister is forming policy and guidance for EHE and Education Otherwise believes that any policy should be based on accurate data. To that end, a survey was taken of home educating families in Wales to ascertain the reasons why parents choose to EHE their children.

- 44.30% of parents referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main initial reason for home educating their children. These parents frequently referred to safeguarding concerns related to school.
- This included General dissatisfaction with the school system (22.59%), the school curriculum not relevant or suitable (8.99%), the school being unable to meet the child's special needs (7.24%) and bullying at school (5.48%)
- The most commonly cited reason for initially choosing to home educate a child, was that home education provides a better education than school, at 23.68, rising to 29.91% citing this as their current reason to EHE.
- Health needs, including the child's mental health were cited by 16.01% of parents as their primary initial reason for home educating the child.
- Parents who EHE would consider school in 9.05% of cases, mainly if the child expressed a wish to attend school.
- Parents will continue to choose EHE at higher rates, if schools do not become safer, more accessible to all children and excellent sources of a World class education. Welsh schools cannot make that claim now or in the foreseeable future.
- There are many children in Welsh schools who are deeply unhappy, being failed by the system, or both. School simply is not the best place for every child.

The background

There is a mismatch between evidence, need, policy and narrative used in respect to Elective Home Education (EHE).

The aim should be that all children are educated in a manner that meets their individual needs and thus maximises the probability that they will reach their full potential. To this end, Education Otherwise is passionate about supporting evidence based change in the narrative and approach to EHE in order to facilitate this. In addition, Education Otherwise also seeks to highlight and celebrate current good practice and policy where these exist.

Since 2010, Wales has seen an increase in calls for close regulation and oversight of EHE, from a small number of influential public figures and organisations. This includes forceful demands from the former Children’s Commissioner for Wales, Ms Sally Holland¹, for regulation of EHE. Draft legislation was brought forward but did not proceed following consultation², which consultation found stakeholders including the General Medical Council raising strong objections to the proposals.

Notwithstanding the very strong objections to the draft legislation, EHE families in Wales are currently on tenterhooks, worried about possible provisions which may be made by Jeremy Miles, the Education Minister, in new guidance that is proposed for the autumn of 2022 or early 2023. These concerns are exacerbated by Mr Miles having made clear his view that he believes that the best place for every child is in school.

‘We are keen to make sure that children are being taught in school with their peers, subject to the safeguarding regime that all schools operate.

*we are looking to bring forward legislation in this space—hopefully to be bringing forward legislation this summer—which would have the intention that it would be in place by next year, which would strengthen the tools available to local authorities in this area’.*³

¹ Children’s Commissioner Wales (2022) Review of Welsh Government: home education and independent schools [Online] available from: <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/our-work/current-work/review-of-welsh-government-home-education-and-independent-schools/>

² Children Act 2004 Education Database (Wales) Regulations 2020 and the Education (Information about Children in Independent Schools) (Wales) Regulations 2020 <https://gov.wales/written-statement-children-act-2004-education-database-wales-regulations-2020-and-education>

³ Jeremy Miles MS in Plenary 30th March 2022 [Online] Available from: <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/12802?lang=en-GB#A71318>

Parents feel beleaguered, stigmatised and unfairly judged as a minority whose members often hold differing, strong philosophical views about their educational choices for their child. There is potential therefore for conflict when superficial to little understanding of educational philosophies that deviate from those associated with attending school are used to drive policy and legislation.

The Minister is to be commended for expressing a need to base policy and legislation on good quality evidence and acknowledging that:

'We need to move from a relationship between home educators and local authorities that is one of a policing relationship, if you like, into one that is one of mutual support and trust'⁴.

Of course, trusting relationships are not based on enforced relationships, but crucially, they must also be based on good quality information. Furthermore, in light of the potential for conflict, which is not in the best interests of children in Wales, it is imperative that future policy and legislation be based on accurate information.

On 29th June 2022, the Minister stated his understanding of the reasons that parents in Wales have for deciding to EHE⁵:

'...the three most common reasons that families have given for withdrawing children from school are what they describe as 'lifestyle', which is 29 per cent, COVID-related anxiety, which is 12 per cent, and school-related anxiety, which is 11 per cent'.

Previous research brings these points into question⁶, as does the source of the information on which the Minister bases his statement. The Minister's statement is based on information from Data Cymru, which in turn, obtains the data from EHE leads in each local authority. Those 'leads' enquire with the school as to the reason given for the child being removed from the school roll and seek to corroborate this information from parents. However, although levels of trust between EHE families and local authority staff are good in most authorities in Wales, parents nonetheless have greater trust in the EHE community and those who work directly with that community or represent its interests.

⁴ Jeremy Miles. 29th June 2022 Children, Young People and Education Committee. Welsh Government. <https://record.senedd.wales/Committee/12853#C437649>

⁵ As 5.

⁶ See for example: Cheasley, S (2018) 'A Comparative Analysis of Home Education in Eight Local Authorities and Nationally' [Online] <http://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/2018/08/28/comparative-analysis-home-education-eight-local-authorities-nationally-preliminary-report/> and Charles-Warner, W (2020) 'Home Education Trends: The Covid Effect'. Education Otherwise [Online] available from: <https://www.educationotherwise.org/category/research/>

EHE individuals are less trusting of their local authorities than they are of home education organisations⁷, rendering them less likely to disclose reasons which they may not wish to share. This research aims to provide more accurate details of the reasons why parents in Wales chose to EHE, in order to better inform policy development.

Method

During July 2022 a survey was undertaken across a mix of home education groups in Wales, in order to ascertain the main reasons why parents in Wales originally chose to EHE their children and why they continue to do so.

Respondents were asked to confirm whether they commenced EHE prior to 2020 and the influence of Covid 19, or after that point in order to differentiate between those for whom Covid 19 may have been an influencing factor in the initial decision to EHE and those for whom it could not have been. Respondents were also asked to give their primary and secondary reasons for choosing to EHE initially and for continuing to do so currently.

Respondents were provided with a list of reasons why parents EHE informed by previous research, including:

- Home education provides a better education than school.
- The school curriculum is not suitable or relevant.
- General dissatisfaction with the school system.
- Health reasons including child's mental health.
- Covid 19 lockdown gave me a chance to see how my child thrived learning at home.
- Concern that the environment at school increases the risk of Covid 19 infection.
- A temporary measure.
- School could not meet my child's special needs.
- No school places at preferred school.
- Bullying at school.
- Religious reasons.
- Child is a young carer.
- Child is a performer.

⁷ Cheeseley, S. (2018) 'Comparative Analysis of Home Education in Eight Local Authorities and Nationally' [Online] Available from: <https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/2018/08/28/comparative-analysis-home-education-eight-local-authorities-nationally-preliminary-report/he-survey-final-2/>

- Child is gifted and talented.
- School pressurised me into removing the child.
- More family time.
- More opportunity to travel.
- School refuser or school phobic.
- Other.

Total number of responds was 245 of which 243 provided full responses to the survey. There were 4677 EHE children in Wales on 1st April 2022⁸ although numbers fluctuate, particularly seasonally, with April usually seeing higher numbers than average for the year.

Previous United Kingdom research⁹ found that numbers of EHE children could be multiplied by 0.68 to approximate numbers of parents sufficiently accurately to use for data analysis. This approximation would indicate that 4677 children equates to 3180 parents. As numbers of EHE parents are a finite population, the sample size obtained of 243 falls close to the requirement for a $\pm 5\%$ margin of error. This was considered suitable for the purpose of the research.

Presentation of results uses accessible language in order to ensure access by the widest possible audience of both stakeholders within the EHE community and those in formal roles connected to EHE.

Reasons for home education

The Elective Home Education Non-Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities¹⁰ cites reasons why parents elect to home educate their children, but we question the source of this list, given that it has not been confirmed in previous research studies¹¹.

Reasons listed are:

- Ideological or philosophical
- Health (including emotional health and well-being)
- Cultural

⁸ Data taken from freedom of information responses from all Welsh local authorities.

⁹ Authors own research into School Attendance Orders (SAO) undertaken during 2021. SAOs must be served on each parent and results of freedom of information requests made indicated that the number of parents on whom SAOs were served equated to 0.68% of the number of children for whom SAOs were served

¹⁰ Welsh Government (2017) Guidance document number: 202/2016 'Elective Home Education Non-Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities' [Online] Available from: <https://gov.wales/elective-home-education-local-authorities>

¹¹ See 7 above.

- Religious
- Bullying
- Special educational provision
- Language choice
- Length of school journey
- Awaiting a place in school of their choice
- Flexibility and tailoring of approach.

Cultural reasons are also cited by the Department for Education (DfE) which feeds into fears of radicalisation¹², but no parent cited such reasons in this or previous research. Length of school journey has also not been cited by parents in research to date.

Although reasons were included in the study that have not previously been cited by parents in earlier research, the responses confirmed that ‘a temporary measure’, ‘child is a young carer’ and ‘child is a performer’ were not cited by any respondent. Only one respondent cited religious reasons as the basis for their decision to EHE. Anecdotally, administrators of home education support groups confirm that these are not reasons cited by parents. In view of this, we have omitted these reasons from the report.

A 2018 survey by Cheeseley¹³ found that 84% of respondents gave the primary reason for EHE as dissatisfaction with school provision, including dissatisfaction with special needs provision, or philosophical reasons (fig: 1). This research examines wider ranging cited reasons.

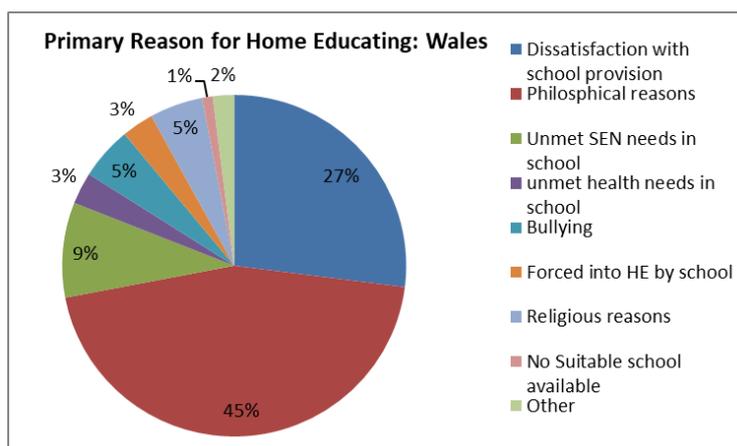


Fig:1: Primary reason for home educating in Wales.

¹² Charles-Warner, W. (2018) ‘Radicalisation of Home Educated Children, Reality or Myth’ CPE [Online] Available from: <https://www.personalisededucationnow.org.uk/2018/06/12/radicalisation-home-education-reality-myth/>

¹³ See 8 above.

In the survey, 44.30% of parents referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their initial primary reason for home educating their children. This included General dissatisfaction with the school system (22.59%), the school curriculum not relevant or suitable (8.99%), the school being unable to meet the child’s special needs (7.24%) and bullying at school (5.48%) (Fig:2).

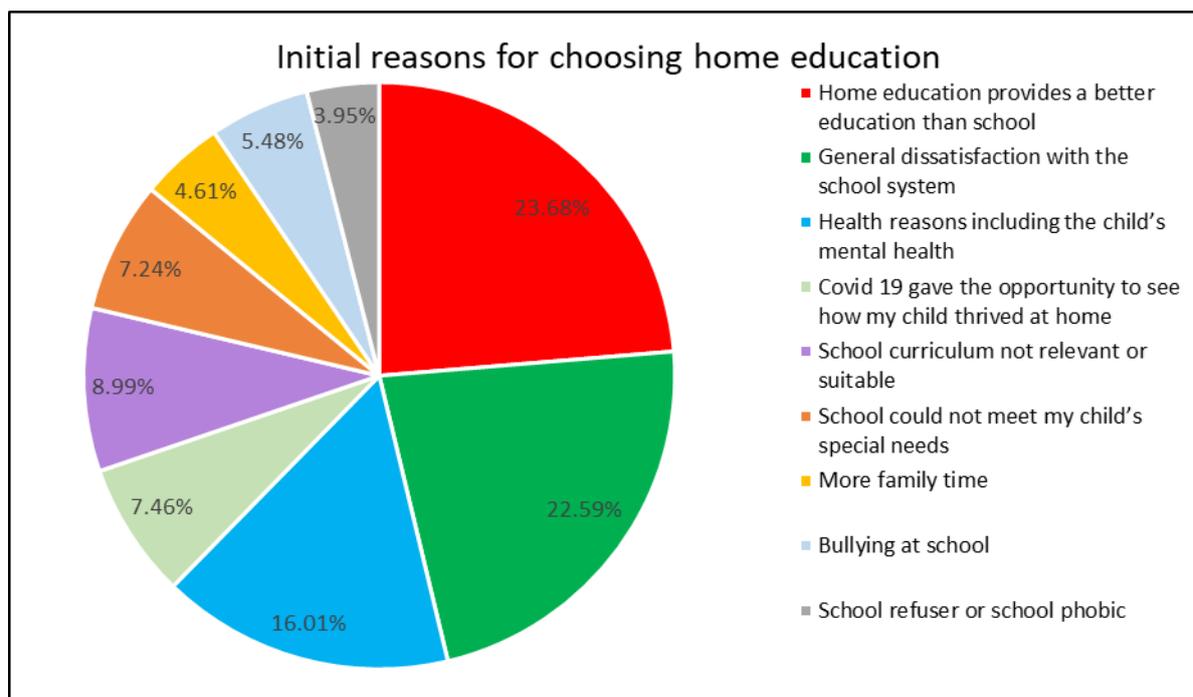


Fig: 2. Initial primary reasons given by parents for home educating their child.

These parents frequently referred to safeguarding concerns related to school, particularly for special needs children being physically restrained, being bullied, or not having their needs met. It is this category and bullying upon which parents provided commentary most frequently.

‘School is socially damaging, being forced to sit in groups of only the same aged children and not mixing with a normal range of people. In school, my children were hidden from view’.

‘Schools cannot meet the psychosocial needs of children in the way that loving parents can’.

‘School pressures children to read and write too young as well as forcing them to move on when they are not ready’.

‘We had no choice but to deregister due to the school not meeting our child’s needs. His mental health suffered as a result’.

'I had to remove my child from the toxic environment in the school system, he was scarred by the indoctrination of values that we do not share and casual prejudice against the disabled in the classroom'.

'My child suffered bullying and physical harm at the hands of a teacher who used brute force to restrain him. SEN children are treated like criminals'.

The most commonly cited reason for initially choosing to EHE a child, was that home education provides a better education than school (23.68%). Health needs, including the child's mental health were cited by 16.01% of parents as their primary initial reason for choosing to EHE the child. Some parents clarified their health concerns and it was notable that these were primarily related to anxiety and children's mental health. This confirms the findings of the Children's Society¹⁴ which compared children's well-being in the UK with other European countries and found that:

'Children's happiness with life has been in decline for most of the last decade and this year is no exception. Worries about relationships with friends, appearance and school seem to be key factors. Even before the pandemic, 15-year-olds in the UK were among the saddest and least satisfied with their lives in Europe. It is time to listen to what young people need'.

Taking the 44.30% of parents who referred to negative reasons relating to schools as their main reason for home educating their children, together with this high level of concern for children's mental health, home educating families would argue that very often, their decision to home educate is based on listening to their children where Government and local authorities do not do so.

The Minister's suggestion that the decision to EHE is based on 'COVID-related anxiety' in 12% of cases is not borne out by the findings, with only 1.23% of parents citing concerns about Covid 19 as a primary or secondary reason to EHE initially (Fig:3). This may reflect the timing of the research to which the Minister refers, as if Data Cymru has taken its information from 2020, or early 2021, during the early stages of the pandemic, those figures would be more in line with findings of Covid 19 specific EHE research¹⁵.

¹⁴ The Children's Society (2019) 'the good Childhood Report'. [Online] Available from:

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

¹⁵ Charles-Warner, W (2020) 'Home Education Trends, Preliminary Report'. Education Otherwise [Online] available from: <https://www.educationotherwise.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Report-home-education-Trends-preliminary-report.pdf>

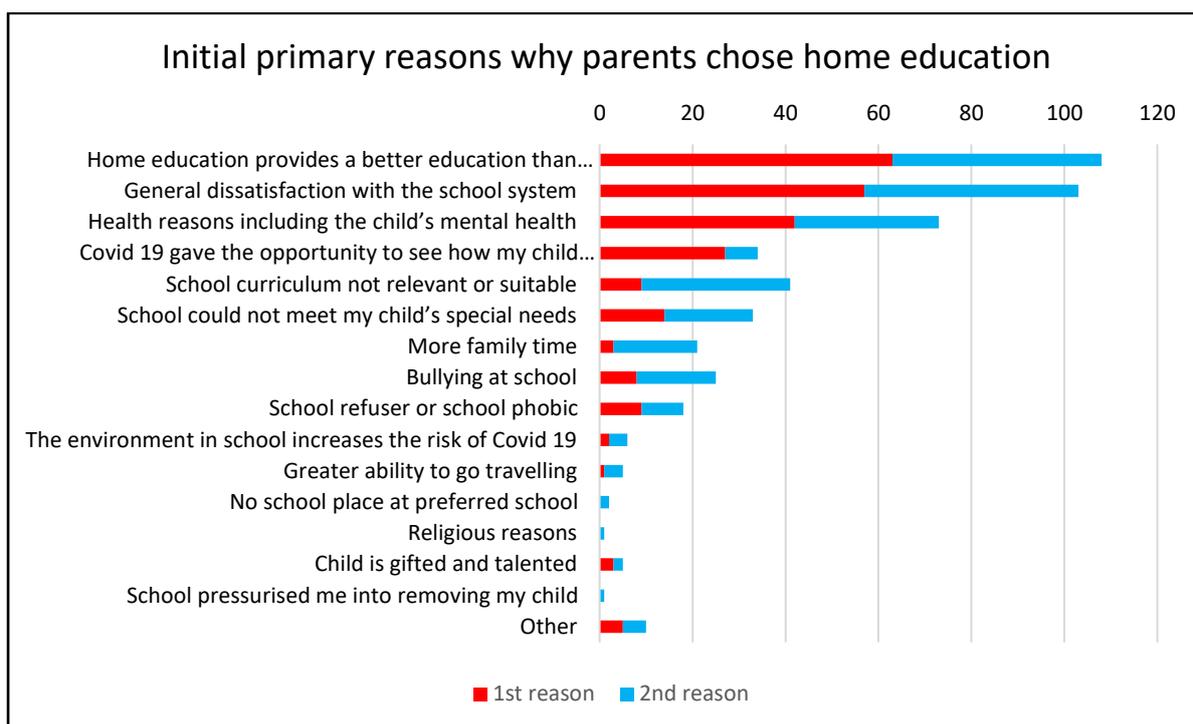


Fig: 3. Full range of initial primary reasons why parents chose to home educate a child.

The Minister's suggestion that 29% of families give reasons for EHE that are 'lifestyle related,' is not borne out in respect of initial reasons given, with 4.61% of parents citing 'more family time as their initial primary or secondary reason to EHE, a further 1.03% citing greater ability to go travelling and a further 1.03% citing the ability to use world travel or flexibly timings for learning. However, initial reasons do not necessarily remain as primary reasons for continuing to EHE.

It is more difficult to be precise in respect of parents making the choice to EHE on the basis of 'School-related anxiety, which is 11 per cent,' as school refuser or school phobic was cited by 4.13% of parents as a reason for initially choosing to EHE, but the 16.01% of parents citing the child's health as a reason includes many who added commentary about the child's mental health problems being linked to the school environment:

'My child became so unhappy and anxious in the school environment that he stopped wanting to do anything'.

'I was concerned for my child's mental health, he was diagnosed ASD and high anxiety, but the school treated him like a naughty child. It was highly distressing for him'.

'My daughter was so low in school'.

Fewer than 5 parents each cited their initial reasons as: no school place at preferred school, religious reasons, pressure to off roll from the school and the child is gifted and talented.

Current reasons for home education

Reasons for the decision to EHE currently differ markedly from the initial reasons given in many cases (fig: 4).

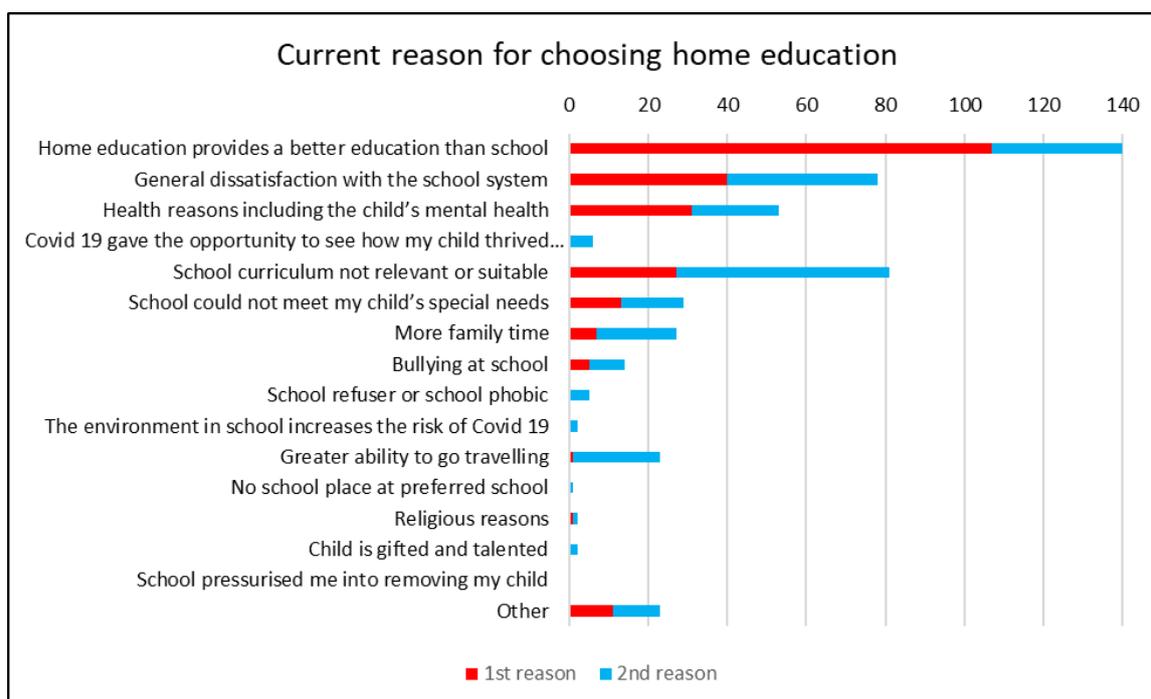


Fig 4: Current reasons for decision to continue to EHE a child.

The most notable change is a marked increase in numbers of parents citing home education provides a better education than school as their current reason to EHE at 29.91%, a rise from 23.68% citing this reason for their initial choice to EHE (Fig: 5). The increase in parents citing this as a first reason currently is greater than those citing it as a second reason.

Some parents come to EHE with an element of trepidation, often doubting their own ability and expecting to replicate school at home¹⁶. This is particularly so in cases where parents commence EHE as a response to negative reasons relating to school.

¹⁶ Observations taken from the Education Otherwise helpline and online advice service.

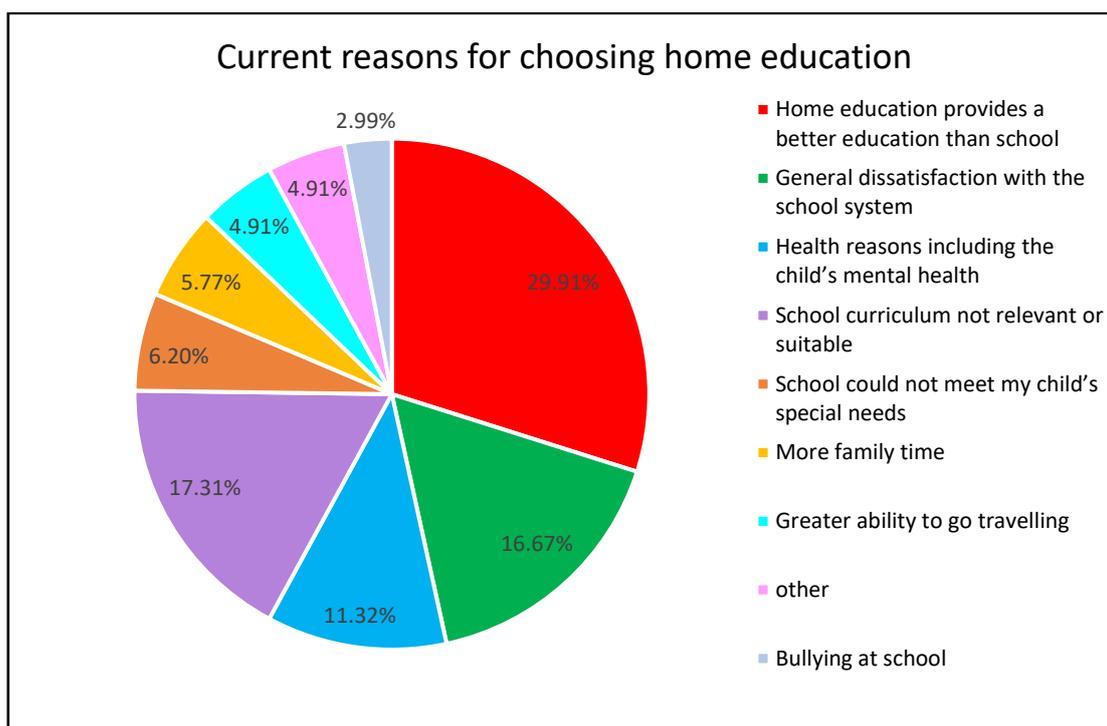


Fig: 5. Current reasons for choosing home education.

Our society treats school as the social norm, with rhetoric demonising EHE as somehow lesser¹⁷, including amongst public officials:

*'I don't really agree with home learning, some parents don't have any knowledge at all, what gives them the right to think they can home school their children, how do we know they are doing a good job?'*¹⁸

Increasing numbers of parents citing home education as providing a better education than school as their current reason to EHE, may be indicative of those parents having greater recognition of the benefits of EHE, once that position is established.

Reduction in numbers currently giving general dissatisfaction with the school system from 22.59% initially to 16.67% currently, together with numbers citing bullying at school as a concern falling from 5.48% initially to 2.99%, would appear to suggest that parents coming to EHE develop a recognition that schools do a good enough job. However, this is not supported by the finding that parents citing the school curriculum as not being relevant or suitable rose from 8.99% initially to 17.31% currently.

¹⁷ See for example Wollaston, S (2017) 'Feral Families review – no school and unlimited ice-cream? No wonder the kids are happy' Guardian. [Online] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/oct/27/feral-families-review-off-grid-parenting-no-school>

¹⁸ Phillips, M. Cited in Jenkins, K. (2022) 'Increasing numbers of home schooled children in Pembrokeshire' [Online] Available from: <https://www.westerntelegraph.co.uk/news/20251058.increasing-numbers-home-schooled-children-pembrokeshire/>

Health reasons including the child's mental health were cited as current reasons to EHE by 11.32% of parents, a fall from 16.01% who initially cited this reason. Schools can and do have negative effects on children's mental health¹⁹ as is borne out by reports²⁰ that:

'One in three young people say their mental health and wellbeing improved during COVID-19 lockdown measures, with potential contributing factors including feeling less lonely, avoiding bullying and getting more sleep and exercise'.

The Minister is to be commended for recognising that the curriculum in Welsh schools needed improving and for taking clear steps toward those improvements²¹. Parents expressed strong views on the Welsh school system, often referring to its restrictive nature and lack of accommodation of difference:

'Our main reason for homeschooling is that the Welsh language policy has had major detrimental effects on our autistic son. It left him years behind his peers in literacy and language as he was taught in a language that he could not understand. Home education is working for him, he is now reading above his age and enjoying learning about our Welsh history. He even started Welsh learning on Duolingo. Please address this situation in our schools, every child deserved an education that is engaging and delivered in a way that they can understand'.

'Childhood is precious and children need the opportunity to learn social skills that are appropriate within society, not from peers in a controlled environment'.

'I do not want my child marginalised in a school one size fits all regime'.

It is notable that other positive reasons related to EHE were cited more frequently by parents as their current reason to EHE than an initial reason. More family time was cited by 5.77% of parents compared to 4.61% who cited this reason initially. Parents cited having greater ability to go travelling as a reason for currently choosing EHE in

¹⁹ The Children's Society (2019) 'the good Childhood Report'. [Online] Available from: <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/good-childhood>

²⁰ Brierley, G. (2022) 'One in three young people say they felt happier during lockdown'. University of Cambridge [Online] Available from: <https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/news/one-in-three-young-people-say-they-felt-happier-during-lockdown>

²¹ Senedd Research (2022) 'Going live: Rolling out the new curriculum from this September' [Online] Available from: <https://research.senedd.wales/research-articles/going-live-rolling-out-the-new-curriculum-from-this-september/>

4.91% of cases. These changes may indicate that some parents are finding previously unconsidered advantages in EHE after initially coming to EHE for other reasons.

Respondents were asked to confirm whether they commenced EHE prior to 2020 and the influence of Covid 19, or after that point in order to differentiate between those for whom Covid 19 may have been an influencing factor in the initial decision to EHE and those for whom it could not have been. After factoring reasons provided which directly relate to Covid into the analysis, no significant difference was found between the two cohorts.

Persuading home educating parents to choose school

EHE is of equal legal status to schools, it is a viable and legal choice for a parent to make and it is not a safeguarding risk. Notwithstanding, the Minister has made clear this view that all children are better off in school²² and expressed concern about increases in numbers of EHE children²³. This raises the question of whether parents would like their child to attend school at some point and 9.05% of parents indicated that they would consider this. Of those parents expressing this view, several indicated that the choice would be that of the child:

'The choice lies with what my child feels is the best option for them'.

'The only reason for considering this would be if my child asked me to send him to school.'

'I do not wish my teenager to attend school. However, if she wishes to do so I will support her wishes'.

'My first child went to school after several years of home education and thrived. If my second child asks to, I will support him'.

If the Minister is to persuade EHE parents who would consider school to take the next step, schools will have to change rather more quickly than envisaged, although some parents refer to excellent local schools as choices for the future:

²² Jeremy Miles MS in Plenary 30th March 2022 [Online] Available from: <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/12802?lang=en-GB#A71318>

²³ Jeremy Miles 29th June 2022 Children, Young People and Education Committee. Welsh Government. <https://record.senedd.wales/Committee/12853#C437649>

'I would like my child to go back in 6th form as the 6th form in our local school is excellent'.

Parents were forthright in the views of schools referring to failings that could be addressed, such as lack of appropriate provision for children with additional learning needs. Parents looked elsewhere for support for additional needs, including using online schools:

'The cost of supporting three children with ALN is not manageable when only one of us can work. We are looking at independent special schools for them as that seems to be the only way a school will meet their needs'.

'I am not against school, but it should not be at the expense of my child's mental health'.

Schools need to be more open to adapting their offer for the individual child and less targeted on set goals or attendance. Parents referred to lack of provision for gifted children who feel held back and the need for change:

'School would have to drastically change for me to consider it'.

'My children will never attend school as it does not allow them to learn at their pace, travel or enjoy celebrations and festivals'.

'The education system does not allow for children as individuals to study what they are interested in, take a degree at the age they are ready to do it, rather than everything at the same arbitrary level for all'.

Of those parents initially citing a negative reason related to school as their primary reason for initially deciding to EHE, 56.94% cited positive reasons about EHE as their current reason for their choice. A policy of seeking to persuade parents to return their child to the school system, could be damaging to those children who could benefit from the many positive advantages of EHE.

Parents EHE for many reasons, including negative reasons related to school. That position will remain the case until radical changes are made to the school system.

Conclusion

The Minister's contention is not supported by the research:

‘The three most common reasons that families have given for withdrawing children from school are what they describe as ‘lifestyle’, which is 29 per cent, COVID-related anxiety, which is 12 per cent, and school-related anxiety, which is 11 per cent’.

Lifestyle choices were the mainstay of EHE historically, but the situation has moved on, driven by dissatisfaction with the school system and negative perceptions of the school offer.

Parents often come to EHE with some reluctance, as a last resort when school has failed their child, or when they see no other option. If the Minister is set on returning those children to the classroom, the classroom needs to change. You cannot put children into classrooms that have yet to adapt to be suitable for those children and to meet their needs.

Parents increasingly find advantages in EHE, not least that it provides a better education than school does. It supports family life and the primacy of the parent in the child’s life. Parents will continue to choose EHE at higher rates, if schools do not become safer, more accessible to all children and excellent sources of a World class education. Welsh schools cannot make that claim now or in the foreseeable future.

Whilst many children thrive in Welsh schools and many Welsh schools do an excellent job, there are many children in Welsh schools who are deeply unhappy, being failed by the system, or both. School simply is not the best place for every child.

Education Otherwise would welcome a sea change in approach that truly acknowledges that EHE is of equal status to school: instead of the narrative of numbers of EHE children being a concern, we hope to see a narrative of encouraging every parent to choose the right education for their individual child, whether that be in a school, EHE or another form of provision.

W. Charles-Warner
December 2022