

# Home Education, Picking up the Failings of Schools



Wendy Charles-Warner 2024

## Executive Summary

For many parents, school is the most suitable choice for their children's education, just as for others home education is the most suitable choice. The salient word being 'choice'. Many parents feel deprived of real choice and forced to home educate their children due to schools not being fit for purpose and, at times, even damaging. In this report, disenfranchised and disillusioned parents tell us how schools could be improved and give them back real choice.

- Our previous survey found that 54% of children coming new to home education in the twelve months to January 2024 had SEN, mental health issues or both. These children felt unsupported and their needs were barriers to accessing school, which could be addressed, often at low or no cost.
- The new Government proposal to have a mental health professional in every school is a welcome idea, but nonetheless a sticking plaster over a wound which does nothing to address the injury itself or its causes.
- Fines and punishments do not work to support children and must be kept only for extreme cases. Schools need to talk to families and children in a respectful way, actively listening at the early stages of attendance difficulties and working to support the child, not seeking to attain attendance goals.
- Truly safeguarding children in school should be a priority, particularly children with SEN. This includes removing isolation rooms, restricting restraint to *in extremis* and acting robustly to address bullying.
- School environments need to be changed to reduce noise, garish colours and to improve toilet access and school uniform wearability. Innovative but simple solutions can and should be implemented as a matter of priority, such as a quiet corner being provided in every class room.
- Curriculums need to be more flexible with recognition that many children are not academic, but can attain their potential within arts, technology or alternative learning. Flexischooling and schools offering different approaches are bold but effective ways forward for disenfranchised children.

Currently, many parents are coming to home education as 'school escapees' in a manner akin to constructive dismissal. There is no 'elective' in home education for those families. Regulation of home education does nothing to address this, however, making schools welcoming and accessible to children will.

## The Background

Many children thrive at school as do many children thrive in home education, the important thing is that parents can make a genuine choice of education approach for their children which is in those children's best interests. However, in early 2024, Education Otherwise identified a worrying trend in families coming to home education, not because they chose to do so, but because they felt that they had no choice<sup>1</sup>. For the first time in its 48 years of experience, the charity saw those coming to home education reluctantly (54%), outweigh those who actively chose to home educate, bringing the term 'Elective Home Education' (EHE) into question for many.

Every day we hear parents express frustration that government responses to this unprecedented situation centre around negativity toward home education as a choice. This is often accompanied by headlines concentrating on numbers<sup>2</sup>, rather than putting the issues behind those numbers, which often lie within the school system, to the fore. Put simply, home education is not an easy choice but one which takes an enormous commitment in terms of time and financial resources, it is not a decision made lightly by many, nor one which should be a 'no choice' for parents.

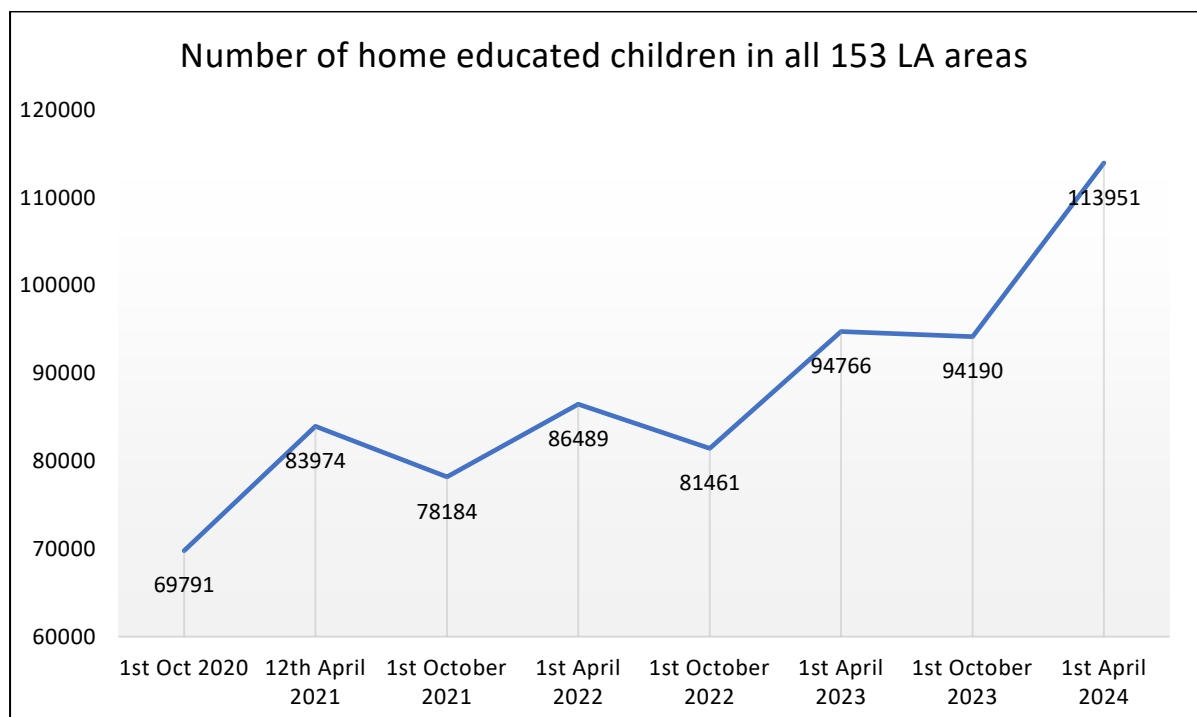


Fig. 1: Numbers of home educated children through the pandemic to 2024

<sup>1</sup> Charles-Warner (2024) 'Home Education Trends: Changing Cohorts' [Online] Available from: <https://www.educationotherwise.org/category/research/>

<sup>2</sup> See for example Adams, R. (2024) 'England homeschooling surge could become permanent, data suggests'. Guardian [Online] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2024/jan/25/england-homeschooling-surge-could-become-permanent-data-suggests>

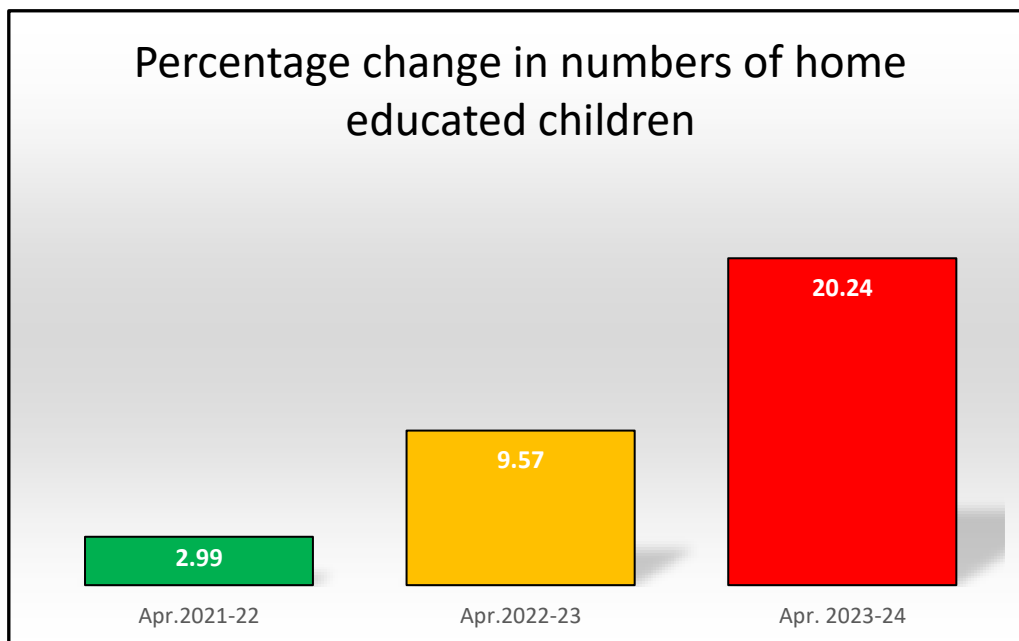


Fig 2: Percentage change in numbers of home educated children April 2021 to 2024.

Parents coming new to home education in the twelve months to January 2024, cited their child's needs not being met in school in 54% of cases; the majority of these unmet needs related to the child's mental health and Special Educational Needs (SEN) not being met (50% of cases). This is borne out by Connolly et. al.<sup>3</sup> who found:

*'In 94.3% of cases, school attendance problems were underpinned by significant emotional distress, with often harrowing accounts of this distress provided by parents. While the mean age of the CYP in this sample was 11.6 years (St Dev 3.1 years), their School Distress was evident to parents from a much younger age (7.9 years). Notably, 92.1% of CYP currently experiencing School Distress were described as neurodivergent (ND) and 83.4% as autistic...In addition, clinically significant anxiety symptomology (92.5%) and elevated demand avoidance were also pervasive. Mental health difficulties in the absence of a neurodivergent profile were, however, relatively rare (6.17%). Concerningly, despite the striking levels of emotional distress and disability reported by parents, parents also reported a dearth of meaningful support for their CYP at school.'*

Currently, there is a 'Fundamental breakdown in the relationship between schools and parents across the socioeconomic spectrum'<sup>4</sup>. Rising numbers of home educated children is a symptom of the inability or unwillingness of some schools to protect and

<sup>3</sup> Connolly, S.E., Constable, H.L. and Mullally, S.L. (2023) 'School distress and the school attendance crisis: a story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need' In Front Psychiatry [Online] Available from: [https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37810599/#:~:text=Notably%2C%2092.1%25%20of%20CYP%20currently,CI%20\(24.67%2C%2088.07\)%5D](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37810599/#:~:text=Notably%2C%2092.1%25%20of%20CYP%20currently,CI%20(24.67%2C%2088.07)%5D)

<sup>4</sup> Burtonshaw, S. and Dorrell E (2023) 'Listening to, and learning from, parents in the attendance crisis.' Public First [Online] Available from: <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/public-first-research-finds-parental-support-for-fulltime-schooling-has-collapsed.html>

support our most vulnerable children and home education is bearing the burden of that situation. It could not be clearer that those children need the clear failures within the school system to be tackled, which raises the question of what within that system needs addressing and how.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative approach in order to investigate the reasons behind what is already clear to us from quantitative data; many parents who want their children to receive education in school feel let down and unable to achieve that aim.

A survey was taken of parents who came new to home education during the two years to August 2024, through social media (n=173). Parents were asked to provide free text answers to clarify what they felt could be done to improve the school environment in order to make it viable for their children to attend. In addition, a qualitative analysis was made of calls from parents considering home education, or new to home education, received by the Education Otherwise helpline during 2024 (n = 2,200).

Unless otherwise stated, quotes given in this report are anonymised words of parents taking part in the research.

## Simple and Complex Problems

The new Government has confirmed an intention<sup>5</sup> to '*Introduce specialist mental health support for children and young people in every school*' and to place '*Young Futures hubs in every community*' in order to address what it describes as '*sticking plaster politics*' which have made children '*casualties*' of government. In the current climate of over 40,000 children in England waiting more than two years for Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and 39% (372,800) of those referred to CAMHS having their referral closed before accessing support<sup>6</sup>, such a proposal is welcomed. However, providing mental health support to children is in practice, just another sticking plaster on the wound which takes no account of what caused the wound in the first place. Furthermore, we do not know at what level of expertise the specialist mental health support in schools may be. What is needed, is to investigate what part the schooling system plays in causing the crisis in the first place. In other words, we must alleviate the symptoms by treating the underlying cause.

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<sup>5</sup> Labour (2024) 'Labour's Child Health Action Plan will create the healthiest generation of children ever' [Online] Available from: <https://labour.org.uk/updates/stories/labours-child-health-action-plan-will-create-the-healthiest-generation-of-children-ever/>

<sup>6</sup> Children's Commissioner for England (2024) 'Over a quarter of a million children still waiting for mental health support' [Online] Available from: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/over-a-quarter-of-a-million-children-still-waiting-for-mental-health-support/>

*'School could not meet my child's needs precisely because schools are not fit for purpose. The entire system is set up to be one-size-fits-all and is basically incapable of dealing with a child unable to fit that one size.'*

## Talk to families

A clear thread throughout parents' responses was the feeling of not being listened to by schools and government, with resultant feelings of disenfranchisement:

*'They could start by getting actual experts in child development and education, plus children, parents and teachers together and asking them to make a plan.'*

*'The whole system needs a complete overhaul starting from the early years. It's a big task and this government doesn't have the imagination or insight to do it really, but they could do worse than having conversations with actual parents and families about the problems they've experienced.'*

*'Encourage more teamwork and involvement by including parents more'*

*'Provide flexibility, training, understanding, clear and transparent communications, no separation of parents from education'*

*'My children need listening to. They're individuals with their own needs, not ticks on an attendance register'*

'Parent blaming' in cases which would benefit from understanding was a feature of 22% of responses. Most usually this related to neurodivergent children being expected to behave in ways which were not within their ability, particularly in mainstream settings:

*'They try to be too lump this and that together, saying behaviour is caused by neglect, trauma, crap parenting but the behaviours are caused by ASD, ADHD and PDA. It doesn't work.'*

Parents expressed frustration and concern that children's attendance 'at all cost' appeared to be the overriding goal, with little or no understanding of how difficult attendance is for some children. This perception has been fuelled by government announcements of the highest ever fines for non-attendance from August 2024; £80 if paid within 21 days, or £160 if paid within 28 days<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Department for education (2024) 'Fines for parents for taking children out of school: What you need to know' [Online] Available from: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2024/08/19/fines-for-parents-for-taking-children-out-of-school-what-you-need-to-know/>



Some parents referred to schools having been understanding of their child's mental health problems initially but becoming impatient due to concerns about the effect on attendance records:

*'After Covid, I just could not get her into school as she was so ill. The school sent work home for a while but recently, the head got annoyed and I was threatened with fines. It was just before the school got OFSTEDed.'*

*'We need there to be no more institutionalised parent carer blame.'*

*'Flexi-schooling and decriminalisation of school attendance difficulties would make the biggest difference to us. We can't even risk trying a school as we'd be exposed to the risk of fines immediately.'*

Since the introduction of the Elementary Education Act 1870, governments have persistently looked to fines and punishment in order to seek to achieve 100% pupil attendance, which raises the question of why a response which has not worked to date is being strengthened as opposed to being reviewed. Fining parents leads to parents withdrawing children who simply cannot attend school regularly. The answer must lie in supporting those children, not punishing their families.

## Safeguarding

Children with SEN are disproportionately subject to bullying in schools<sup>8</sup> and are the very same children who are disproportionately being reluctantly withdrawn from school to be home educated. Respondents to the survey and helpline callers, described harrowing incidents of failure to safeguard children within schools and unwarranted physical restraints and isolation.

*'Bullying was rife, teachers were burnt out, parents were not alerted to mental health warnings in their children and the children learnt to suffer in silence.'*

*'I'm so glad my child is out of that cold prison cell though. That's what he called it. Jail.'*

*'My children had unmet autistic needs for both of them and bullying was recorded via CCTV, but Headmaster denied any ongoing bullying and did nothing.'*

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<sup>8</sup> Anti Bullying Alliance (2021) 'Do children with SEND experience more bullying?' [Online] Available from: <https://anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/tools-information/all-about-bullying/at-risk-groups/sen-disability/do-children-send-experience-more>

*'They failed to keep him safe and told me they believed a bunch of 12 year olds who had bullied him previously over a qualified hospital consultant about his injuries.'*

*'My son was put in isolation most days because he had melt downs over the sensory overload. He started self harming and that was the last straw for me.'*

*'I can't get my head around how two grown men can physically tackle a 7 year old to the ground crushing him, breaking his wrist then just say it was legal restraint.'*

*'My little boy was not even 5 when a teacher broke his ankle using restraint. She said that it was his fault. I call it child abuse'.*

*'(Name) is deaf with SEN. She couldn't hear the nasty stuff, but she came home bruised and in tears most days. Teachers were too busy to notice her being distressed and she couldn't tell them what was happening.'*

*'The bullying was horrendous actual physical attacks on my son, but nothing was done but when he kicked a wall during a meltdown they wanted to suspend him for it!'*

It is clear that if parents cannot trust schools to keep their children safe, those parents will increasingly look to safeguard their children by withdrawing them from state schools. Some may choose the private sector which tends to have smaller classes and higher staff levels, but that choice is not available to those on low, or even average incomes and becoming less available given government proposals to add 20% V.A.T. to school fees from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2025<sup>9</sup>. Education Otherwise has already seen increases in parents withdrawing children from independent schools since this increase was announced and, with choice removed from parents concerned about their child's safeguarding in state schools, that increase is expected to be greater in 2025.

## Environment

Parents in 47% of cases referred to the adverse effects of physical environments on their children's ability to learn and to access school. Whilst poorly maintained buildings needing repair featured in a minority of cases, the majority referred to their children finding environmental factors as significant triggers to children's mental health difficulties, including:

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<sup>9</sup> Shearing, H. (2024) 'When will VAT get added to private school fees?' BBC. [Online] Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c033dp0z1edo>



- bright lighting
- loud bells, excessive noise during lunch and class change over exacerbated by poor acoustic
- garish displays
- poor temperature regulation
- lack of space for movement breaks
- large class size
- lack of toilet facilities and access to toilets

Crucially, school uniform was a bar to many children with SEN:

*'(Name) just can't stand the uniform. She is ASD and sensory things like scratchy material are just not her ability.'*

*'My twins are both SEN and the school won't be at all flexible over stiff leather shoes and ties. You can't put SEN kids in ties!'*

*'Schools need to reconsider the whole concept of uniform and make it more casual.'*

Lack of toilet access was reported, at times due to insufficient toilet facilities but more usually, restriction on when children could use the toilet. This is a particular difficulty for older girls with parents reporting them being humiliated by asking to go to the toilet when a period starts, or being refused permission to do so:

*'She started in the middle of class time and the other kids were making fun of her, but the teacher wouldn't let her go to the toilet. She came home refusing to go to school again and nothing could persuade her.'*

*'Nearly 100 children per toilet, why can't they just have more bloody toilets?'*

Lack of quiet spaces for children needing to regulate featured in 31% of responses with one parent reporting that when she complained about lack of support for when the child became dysregulated, the teacher replied, *'He should shut up and put up, every other child has to do it,'* a response probably lending more to teacher frustration with an unwieldy system than individual unkindness.

## Curriculum

The National Curriculum (NC) as outmoded and inappropriate was raised by 68% of respondents. At primary stage, parents called for formal learning to be introduced at a later stage, with education up to age seven being play based and child centred:

*'A starting age more in-line with Europe and Scandinavia (and therefore universal early years childcare system up to age 6/7), a play-based approach throughout the primary years.'*

*'They need to be more child led and flexible as well as offering more vocational and real-life skills.'*

Flexibility was a key term in many responses, particularly curriculum flexibility:

*'We home educate as needs weren't met in school. I think a far more flexible approach would have helped, at sixth form level as well as primary and secondary. An option to do blended learning so some at home and some at school without pressure to attend. A real flexibility around how many subjects a child takes, some sort of in between place where students have autonomy and can choose what they study. It would be great if it was accepted as it is a great option, give children who can't manage full time education a much more fluid approach that allowed children access to great resources, tutors and funded exams.'*

Parents commented on the rigidity of school rules such as where the child eats lunch and what children can and cannot do at break times. Some parents referred to the need for greater learning outside to replace wholly classroom based learning and the emphasis on core subjects as restrictive to those children who are non academic:

*'More project based learning. Bring in the land and construction subjects again, especially for renewable energy, sustainable affordable house building and a focus on the tech industry. More PE or equivalent either choice based or on skill sets and capability.'*

*'Do away with the standard approach to curriculum i.e. children in this age group must learn this. Base cohorts on ability and aptitude rather than age.'*

*'Maybe the basic 3 Rs are standard, but children can have more choice over what they learn in other areas. Much more opportunity for outdoor learning and play. Less focus on screens before age 10, with practical life skills and hands on experience being valued as much as technology is. Way more funding for music and the arts, drama, dance and visual art valued and prioritised just as much as STEM and sports are.'*

*'I think more children would engage if schooling catered to different learning styles, not all kids are 'academic' we have our artists and creative kids, why not have a school of arts. Sporty kids: school of sports / science school etc. my city has 5 secondary schools which could all individually cater to different learning styles.'*

*‘If your child doesn’t tick the right boxes or pass tests they are put in a category of ‘failing’ or at least made to feel they are ‘behind’ when they may in fact thrive in more interesting topics but have no outlet for them within the tight curriculum.’*

*‘They need to create more non-school placements. ASDAN, AQA unit Awards, Btechs etc inside care farms, woodworking, mechanics, art and drama not school. 14-16 college places need to be freely available and apprenticeships funded from the same age without a need for maths and English after an interview for suitability.’*

As one parent observed, society should ‘Allow each child to become who and what they dream of achieving, not frame them all in one box and expect them to be something they will not’.

In the words of E .E. Cummings: ‘To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best day and night to make you like everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight and never stop fighting.’ A caring society should and can support children to be themselves in a world which values diversity of skills, ambition and children for themselves.

## Simple and Complex Solutions

Many of the changes sought by parents in order to enable their child to access school are simple no cost or low cost solutions. Parents who took part in this research are school escapees, not electively home educating parents; who better to advise and support Government to improve schools for children?

Talking to children and parents with an open and non-accusatory approach, without threat of fines or punishment would be a cost free and readily introduced approach for all schools to take. Government could support this initiative by removing the current pressure on schools to obtain 100% attendance and advising schools to talk to families whose children are having difficulties accessing school at an early stage and in a supportive manner.

Education Otherwise regularly receives copies of letters from head teachers to parents which criticise the parents’ choice, denigrate home education and threaten to report the family to Children’s Social Services if a decision is made to home educate. In such a climate, open and supportive conversation is not possible. Government could address this situation at no cost by publishing clear and unequivocal guidance on supportive interactions which makes clear that parents’ different choices are equally valid and must be equally respected.

Safeguarding in schools is a significant concern, not only for 'school escapee' home educating parents, but also for those whose children remain within the school system. This needs to be addressed, as every child should be safe in school. Reducing bullying is a long term goal reliant on higher teacher pupil ratios, greater understanding of SEN and improvement in the standard of teacher training. However, some low cost adjustments can be made in the short term, such as reducing triggers for SEN children, ensuring that restraint is used only *in extremis* and by qualified individuals, removing isolation rooms and acting robustly and promptly to address reports of bullying.

The school environment is where immediate low and no cost adjustments can be readily made, some needing initiative rather than funding:

- Schools could minimise classroom transfer noise and confusion by changing the approach from children moving between classes to teachers moving between classes for many subjects. For subjects which make this difficult, such as those requiring laboratory equipment, classes could be longer and less frequent in order to reduce number of transfers. Corridors could have lower levels of lighting in order to reduce noise and overstimulation. In addition, whilst a measure which has cost implications, corridors can be carpeted to reduce noise.
- Lunchtime transfers could be reduced by staggering lunch break by age.
- The use of bells could be reduced considerably through reduction of classroom transfer, but also by use of systems such as message announcements being sent through technology to each teacher at required times, or a simple, inexpensive clock in each classroom.
- Garish posters and bright colours can be removed, or placed in a central area which can be accessed by choice.
- Toilet breaks do not incur cost and are essential. Access for children when required would alleviate this stress. Where schools lack facilities, funding should be provided for portable toilet blocks in the short term with longer term funding for building new facilities. Whilst some schools justify locking toilets on the basis that they are abused by a few, simple strategies such as the use of vape and smoke alarms can be introduced to address such concerns.
- Flexischooling arrangements being supported and encouraged in suitable cases could alleviate class size concerns.

- School uniforms are a financial burden on low income families and children with SEN can be sensitive to fit and fabric. A simple uniform of soft fabric such as cotton jersey tops and trousers would be more tolerable for SEN children and also financially affordable.
- A quiet space in every class room could be readily achieved at little cost. Even in cases where a separate quiet room is not available due to restricted space, a quiet corner could be achieved with low cost tools such as a pop up tent, screens, calming colours or low lighting.

Curriculum concerns are perhaps those which need the greatest courage from the Government in order for it to acknowledge that the NC is not the gold standard in education it might once have been. Many children are not academic, but every child can achieve his or her potential, if given the opportunity to do so. Parents are the experts in their children and parents are calling for greater diversity in the curriculum. As one parent reflected, with five schools in the immediate area, it must be possible for each to target different needs such as being primarily arts or technology based. Whilst this may seem to be a difficult issue to tackle, it should be well within the scope of a dynamic and innovative government; the question is 'Can this Government rise to the challenge?'

Increasingly, parents are being urged to register their children in schools and nurseries at ever younger ages<sup>10</sup> and yet, *'Starting school at too early an age, interrupts the child's development. Rather than learning how to learn, children get used to being told how they should be learning. In some cases, the information they are given is not appropriate for their own needs or preference. At its worst, this may even hinder their emotional and academic development.'*<sup>11</sup> A brave Government would step back and recognise the need for children to learn through play until age seven, by supporting parents to parent until that age, in addition to providing high quality nursery care for those who wish to work.

It goes without saying that teacher training should be the best it can possibly be, however, teachers need greater training in SEN and how to recognise and support those needs. Such training should be a short term goal in order to prevent our most vulnerable children from becoming a failed generation.

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<sup>10</sup> SE for example Cosslett, R.L. (2024) 'An anti-childcare movement is spreading online – it's both disturbing and regressive' Guardian, [Online] Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/19/anti-childcare-movement-social-media-parenting>

<sup>11</sup> Aithal, V. (2022) 'The big debate: Should children start school at 7?' Pearson, [Online] Available from: <https://blog.pearsoninternationalschools.com/the-big-debate-should-children-start-school-at-7/>

## Conclusion

Teachers do not enter the profession because they want to fail children but because they want to give those children the best possible education. Parents want the best education for their children. However, schools are currently failing a great many children and as a society, we owe it to those children and our future ability to hold our own in a rapidly changing international world, by providing every child with a high quality, fit for purpose education. That aim should not and must not be purely aspirational.

To end with the words of one parent:

*'My young people will never go back to mainstream school, it would have to be very, very different, basically a 180° different type of school.'*

**Wendy Charles-Warner August 2024**