

Speech on The Home education conference in Germany 27. – 29. of April

## **Home Education in Ireland**

Nick Gudge – Ireland

The history of home education in Ireland is unusual. When Ireland was ruled by Britain there was religious persecution and catholic schools were prohibited. Informal „hedge schools“ were formed where parents, priests and lay people taught in homes around the country. An historical objection to total government control over education was established, supported formidably by the Catholic Church. Ireland’s first president Douglas Hyde was home educated. The writers of the Irish Constitution ensured that there would be constitutional protection for parental choice in education.

Article 42 of the Irish Constitution sets out the relationships between the family, parents, children and the State with respect to education. It says:

1. „The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.“
2. „Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.“
- 3.1. „The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or in any particular type of school designated by the State.“
- 3.2. „The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social.“

In the 1990’s a series of well publicised failed prosecutions of home educated children under the 1926 School Attendance Act led to the creation of the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. Under this legislation a new government body, the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB), was made responsible for setting up a register of all children, including a register of all home educated children. Guidelines were drafted for the assessment of home educated children. To date approximately 320 children have had their educational provision assessed and registered. (Please note there is no assessment of the children.) No one has been declined registration. Most home educators have not registered. Negotiations for the review of these Guidelines are underway between the Home Education Network (HEN) and the NEWB.

HEN was formed specifically to respond to the Education (Welfare) Act. It is the only significant sized formal Home Education organisation in Ireland. It has approximately 150 families as members, with about another 500 families known to them. Together these represent an estimated 1,500 home educated children. It is an inclusive group with no requirements to membership. HEN provides a website, a contact list of home

educators for new members, regional groups which organise activities, a quarterly newsletter, a help line and an annual conference.

The largest groups of home educators in Ireland are those who choose child centred learning, those who choose for religious grounds, those whose children have special physical and psychological needs and those whose children have been bullied in school.

Home education is growing in Ireland and is becoming better known. There have been frequent articles and features in the print radio and television media. All of these have been arranged by HEN over the past 5 years. Almost all the media attention has been positive as a consequence of this policy.

#### Directing Governmental Intervention in Home Education

1. The government and bureaucrats are not an enemy. They are people with power and authority and they are likely to be mis-informed. They are likely to be rational, intelligent and well intentioned. It is their opinions that need changing
2. How can their understanding and information base be favourably changed towards home education?
3. Being aggressive and abusive interaction towards these people is not likely to effectively promote change. If people are treated as enemies they will become enemies.
4. Formulate two or three strategies, (short, medium and long term.) Ensure they do not conflict to avoid less effective use of resources
5. Create the opportunity for open and ongoing dialogue on as many fronts as possible.
6. Appropriate information needs to be directed towards the appropriate people. The judiciary, local government officers, educationalists, psychologists/psychiatrists and the media are all distinct groups. Create information strategies for each of these groups. How can their opinions be favourably changed?
7. Look at where the legislation is best approached for least effort to create most effect.
8. Inform public opinion and generate favourable public opinion. Change public perception to something favourable to Home Education.
9. Try not to be distracted or divided by internal dissent

**Nick Gudge** is the father of three home educated children ages 8, 12, 14. His children are schooled completely informally and have never attended school by choice. Nick has acted as consultant to the Irish Department of Education and The National Education Welfare Board on matters relating to home education. He is acted as NEWB Liaison Officer for the Home Education Network in Ireland for 6 years. And is currently writing a book on Home Education in Ireland. He is also a Taiji Instructor and teaches in Limerick Prison. He is a keen gardener.