

# Home Education in Ireland

by Nick Gudge



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 and he and 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.

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 1990s a series of well publicised failed prosecutions of home educating families 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.

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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.

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