

# Proposal to inspect home schooled families 'intrusive', says Dad

by Meadhbh Monahan

A DRAFT policy that aims to ensure that home educators provide an "efficient full time education" for their children has been described by one Fermanagh parent as "criminal" and "intrusive".

Sean Hanley and his wife Maria home educate four of their children: Josiah (10), Judah (eight), Israel (five) and Psalmody (three). Baby Uriah is 20 weeks old.

A New Yorker, Sean moved to Northern Ireland 15 years ago, where he married Maria, who is originally from the Middle East. He obtained a degree from Queen's University, Belfast and joined the PSNI. He was stationed in Ballymena before being moved to Lisnaskea and then Kesh. Sean and Maria felt that there was a lack of adequate school education for their oldest son who has Autism, therefore they decided to home educate all of their children.

The Hanleys also decided to register as home educators with the Western Education and Library Board (WELB), despite saying that they receive no resources or assistance from the Board. This meant that they were notified in March of the consultation on the 'draft Northern Ireland Elective Home Education Policy'. The majority of home educators in Northern Ireland are not registered, therefore they did not find out about the consultation until April. The consultation ended last Friday (June 27).

"Normally with a consultation of this magnitude you would consult with the primary stakeholders," Sean says. "It's kind of criminal that the home education community could be having something like this proposed – where someone is going to show up at their door and demand access to their home – and they don't know anything about it."

Sean is not clear what the rationale behind the draft policy is, but he believes that its starting point is one of automatic "mistrust" of parents who choose to home educate.

"If you read the draft policy, there is absolutely no justification as to what exactly is the problem that needs a solution. Normally, if you propose something of such an intrusive nature as this, you say: 'We need this policy to deal with x, y and z.' There's nothing like that in the policy,"

Sean states.

The draft policy reads: "Boards have a statutory duty under Schedule 13 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 to ensure that children in their area are receiving efficient full time education appropriate to his or her age, ability and aptitude, and to any special educational needs that he or she may have, and that parents fulfil their duty in this regard."

It states that an Elective Home Education Officer will maintain a database (therefore all home educator parents must register) and will "make decisions with regard to the appropriateness or otherwise of programmes and ensuring that families with children who are home educated are visited at least once a year." It would also be the responsibility of the named officer to liaise with the other Board services e.g. the social services Gateway Team.

The draft policy continues: "The welfare of the child is paramount. Throughout all stages ... consideration will be given to any existing and/or potential safeguarding issues."

Sean likens these proposed new rules to "the State telling parents that their home will have to be inspected before they bring their new baby home from the hospital." He adds: "That kind of thing would only happen in a police State."

Sean describes his home as "one of the most open homes in Northern Ireland," adding: "My wife teaches music. We have pupils and parents in and out of the house all the time – there's nothing we have to hide."

His children have a computer in their room, a reading table in the living room, they do science projects on the kitchen table. This means that "when they are looking to examine the teaching environment, they are requiring access to the entire home."

Sean points to a letter sent to Education Minister John O'Dowd on May 8, 2014 from Graham Stuart MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Home Education in which he highlights his "concerns" with the draft policy and tells the Minister that the current situation is comparable to that in England and Wales, "where local authorities have no statutory duties in relation to monitoring the quality of home education on a routine basis."

Sean takes heart from Mr. Stuart's letter,



Sean Hanley and his wife Maria with their children (from left) Psalmody, Josiah, Israel, Uriah and Judah.

which states that "local authorities should only intervene if they are alerted to a reason for doing so, but are not obliged, or permitted, pre-emptively to seek reasons to intervene." Mr. Stuart says that annual monitoring by Boards "would be inappropriate."

Sean has submitted his response to the consultation, highlighting his belief that, "instead of education boards being accountable to parents, this policy reverses that order and aims to make parents accountable to the board." He also argued that such changes would require legislative amendments, as highlighted in the 2009 Badman review.

At a WELB focus group meeting in Enniskillen on May 27, the consensus from four home educating parents was that it is

"impossible to evaluate the draft policy. It is not well written – it is not good – it misinterprets the legislation. It appears to have been drafted very hastily – it should be scrapped and a completely new one drawn up."

Last week in the Assembly Education Minister John O'Dowd was asked by Jo-Anne Dobson if agrees "that proposing massive changes based on an interpretation of the law, which is not shared by the educational authorities in England, Wales or Scotland, is potentially damaging?"

In response, the Minister said: "This is not England, Wales or Scotland. We have our own education legislation, including on home education. A consultation is going on ... I have a concern that the majority of Members who have spoken on the matter

have spoken about the needs of the adult and not of the child."

This prompted Chairman of the Education Committee Mervyn Storey to accuse the Minister of casting "a slur on parents who make the choice to educate their children at home."

The Minister responded: "The law has said that the guidance requires to be reviewed. The education and library boards have taken it on board and reviewed it ... I regret the fact that the boards did not present me with the consultation documents before issuing. However, I believe that the consultation should continue. I have committed to the House and to others that, at the end of it, I will sign off the guidance if I am satisfied that it is in compliance with the legislation."

## A DAY IN THE LIFE ....



Music lessons in the Hanley household.

A TYPICAL school day in the Hanley household begins with reading at the kitchen table, with the two older children reading a more advanced book than their younger siblings, and everyone helping each other. Then it is time for geography, art and music.

Sean and his wife plan their educational programme according to each child's needs and interests. For example, Josiah (10) has autism, which results in speech difficulties. His parents chose to use Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) which involves breaking skills down into their most basic components, rewarding positive performance with praise and reinforcers, and then 'generalising' skills in a naturalistic setting. An ABA therapist from Parents' Education as Autism Therapists (PEAT) comes to the home to oversee their programme. Sean notes: "Her purpose is to help us, not observe us."

They do not follow a curriculum, instead using information from the home education community (Home Education NI) and keeping up-to-date with assessments online.

The children's interests are paramount,

therefore art and geography feature prominently at the moment. Judah (eight) is interested in butterflies, so they built a butterfly garden where two have recently hatched. Music is practised each morning. Maths is important too and Sean notes that Judah had memorised all of his times tables at the age of six. He adds: "I'm not saying that home educated children are geniuses, but who is going to love your education more than your mum or dad?"

"Home schooling is more flexible in terms of the timetabling," he believes.

Asked if he worries about his children making friends, Sean states that he has "always found it a little bit strange" that parents accept it when "their kids don't even want to walk on the same side of the street as them." He continues: "That has been my experience of a lot of children – there's a lot of anti-social tenancies that are developed – not necessarily at school – and that shame of being seen with your parents is considered acceptable in society now."

He has also noticed "that school children often do not want to hang out with children that are a different age than them. They are generally age segregated

because that's the way it is in school; whereas my kids play outside with all the kids in the neighbourhood, regardless of age."

Home Education NI holds meet-ups on various subjects and educational visits, where "the kids interact with a wide-range of children of all age groups."

Asked if his children ever ask about going to school, Sean replies: "I don't think they have an interest in it, other than the fact there are other kids there." If they ever asked if they could attend school, Sean says: "I would really talk through what the benefits and minuses are. It's really important to talk through issues in a logical format, rather than just deciding for them."

He explains that "the majority of parents connected to Home Education NI would not be at all religious; a large percentage would have had children who were bullied at school."

Sean concludes: "This is not about home versus school education. It's about recognising that parents and not the Education and Library Board's have the highest interest in their own children, and they should be supported and not policed."