

Homeschooling and the lessons we can learn from other countries

Homeschooling is arguably the fastest growing education provision in the State, but is greater regulation needed? Jen Horgan explores



Anna Uí Dhálaigh, husband Peadar and children Ariana, Oisín, and Aonghus.

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JEN HORGAN

Since before covid, and alongside her husband, Anna Uí Dhálaigh, public relations officer with Home Education Network Ireland, has happily [homeschooled](#) her three primary-school aged children.

Anna's story is not unique. Homeschooling is arguably the fastest growing education provision in the State. The number of children on a waiting list for assessment for home education, as at the end of December 2023 was 1,100.

The number of children who are on the active register, as at the end of December 2023 was already 2,447. This is a 20% increase on the same quarter in 2022.

For Anna, it is the best fit for her family. “I have a background in education,” she says.

“When working with Unicef in Nepal, I came across many different approaches to education, like world schooling and unschooling, but when we returned to Ireland I enrolled my daughter in the local school without thinking much about it.

"She was coming home unhappy, and then my son was the same. He hated sitting down for so long during the day. So, we started homeschooling before the pandemic and have kept going since.”



Tánaiste Micheál Martin attracted much negative attention last year when he said: 'I'm not a great fan of homeschooling.' Picture: Leah Farrell / RollingNews.ie

Anna has a degree in early years education and a masters in international development. She thinks teachers are fantastic and appreciates the enormous task of educating up to 30 children in a room. She is not interested in criticising school-based learning.

However, she also feels homeschooling is often a good option for a variety of reasons.

Anna has no issue with being monitored and supported in her homeschooling.

"I am happy with the regulation of homeschooling. We must remember that at the centre of everything, is the child. The home-schoolers I know are happy to engage with Tusla, for the wellbeing of the child.

"I certainly enjoyed their visit and wanted them to see my healthy, happy kids. We had a four-hour preliminary assessment. Some families do not want the inspector to meet the children during the inspection as it is not mandatory."



Should parents have free reign in educating their children? Or should the State have some involvement?

But should they be mandatory?

Anna's reference to Tusla, and her acknowledgement of its role in homeschooling is interesting. The right to home educate is pretty straightforward, indisputable in fact.

But should parents have free reign in educating their children? Or should the State have some involvement? What should that involvement look like? How much is too much? How little is too little? How do we balance the rights of a parent and the rights of a child?

Conversations about homeschooling are heated. In response to any criticism, homeschooling is quickly and correctly identified as a basic right of the parent, protected by our constitution.

Tánaiste Micheál Martin attracted much negative attention last year when he said : “I’m not a great fan of homeschooling. I think children need to socialise.”

Green party Senator Pauline O’Reilly, who is also the party’s spokeswoman for education and higher education, said Mr Martin's comments were “coming from a place of ignorance”.

“I just don't think that that's a route that politicians should be going down,” she said. “Now more than any time before we need to show tolerance for different approaches to life.”

That’s often where the conversation ends, with people either criticising or supporting home education, without a deeper consideration of how the provision, the quickly expanding provision affecting more and more children, should be organised.

So how is it currently organised in Ireland? And how does our approach compare to the approach taken by other countries?



Few conversations around homeschooling include a consideration of the rights of the child to an objective, balanced education.

In Ireland, a branch of Tusla, The Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS) is responsible for the regulation of provision for education in places other than recognised schools. Families must register with the service first and undergo a preliminary assessment.

The service is an increasingly busy one. According to an AEARS spokesperson, “as Tusla continues to reduce the waiting list, the number of applications received increases” .

They add: “AEARS works to reduce the waiting list during the course of the year, and at the same time a large number of new applications are received annually, which are then added to the waitlist in turn.”

Inspections have also increased in number: 292 assessments (all types) were carried out in the third quarter of 2023, bringing the total number in the first nine months of last year to 340, 88% more than the same period in 2022.

[Rights of the child](#)

The rise in inspections is possibly a good thing, not because parents are untrustworthy, but because children are individual, independent, rights holders – and citizens in their own right, as recognised by our children’s referendum, 2012.

Few conversations around homeschooling include a consideration of the rights of the child to an objective, balanced education. What if the homeschooling parent is not teaching the tolerance Pauline O’Reilly mentions? What if the parent doesn’t share a willingness to work with authorities, as Anna Uí Dhálaigh does?

And what is it exactly that Tusla is checking for?

Túsła is charged with the task of ensuring all homeschooled children receive a “minimum education,” and that they’re safe. Little detail is provided on what “minimum” means, however, other than that it should involve a “balanced range of learning experiences, so that no one aspect of your child’s learning is emphasised to the exclusion of others”.



Ireland, it seems, currently sits in an ideological middle- ground, somewhere between a more controlled, state-led education, as in Germany and France, and the laissez-faire approach of both the United States and Britain.

The education provision offered should also “develop your child's personal and social skills and prepare them to be a responsible citizen”. Should the guidance be more detailed and explicit? What does it mean to be “a responsible citizen” in 2024 Ireland?

In a broader context, according to Article 29 of the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child, which Ireland ratified in 1992, the education provided should develop “the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”.

It should develop “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”, alongside “respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilisations different from his or her own”.

Guidance from our neighbours

In the wake of increased number in homeschooling, Ireland might naturally look to other Anglophone countries when considering how to run its provision.

Ireland, it seems, currently sits in an ideological middle- ground, somewhere between a more controlled, state-led education, as in Germany and France, and the laissez-faire approach of both the United States and Britain.

The UK also recognises the rights of families to home educate — although the Conservative government has been making noise about breaking from international human rights laws, Britain is also signed up the UN Convention on the rights of the child.

As in Ireland, more children than ever are being home-schooled in the UK.

Similar to here, parents must ensure a child receives a full-time education from the age of five, but home educators, as in Ireland, do not have to follow any set curriculum and, arguably, have even fewer guidelines to follow.



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If they are unconvinced, or have concerns around a child's welfare, they can serve a school attendance order, so the child is returned to school. In practice, this rarely happens.

This is vastly different to how the state system is operated, wherein parents are regularly fined for absences and enjoy far less parenting freedom than their Irish peers.

Local authorities say there is a compelling case for a national home school register.

Heather Sandy, the chair of the Association of Directors of Children's Services, said: "While a register in and of itself will not keep children safe, it will help to establish exactly how many children are being educated other than at school and to identify which children are vulnerable to harm."

However, many home educators are against any further involvement from the local authorities.

A spokesperson for Educational Freedom argues: "Quite simply, it is not their duty to ensure the education is suitable, it is the parent's duty. They have no right to visit the home or see the child, that would be akin to accusing the parents of something and making them prove it not to be true."

Its website highlights just how infrequently local authorities issue attendance orders on home-educated children.

[The United States](#)

The homeschooling population of the United States had been growing at an estimated 2% to 8% a year over the past several years, but has escalated even further in recent years. One estimate has two million children homeschooled in the US.

Regulation is also scant in America, a country that has also not ratified the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child.



Numerous US states have no requirements for parents to even notify school districts when they decide to homeschool and there are no check-in.

Political commentator John Oliver says: “The ceiling of how good homeschooling can be is admittedly very high,” before adding, “but the floor of how bad it can get is basically non-existent” because of how unregulated homeschooling is in parts of the country.

Indeed, numerous states have no requirements for parents to even notify school districts when they decide to homeschool and there are no check-ins.

“Deregulating homeschooling doesn’t just eliminate safeguards against parents who are bad teachers,” Oliver argues. “It also eliminates them against parents who are bad people.”

On social media platform X, American education commentator Jennifer Carolan compares enrolment in public education in the academic years 2015/16 and 2022/23. There is a drop of 15.8 % in Los Angeles. It is down 18.41 in San José and 17.89 in Chicago.

She points to the rise in virtual schools, as well as homeschooling, and enrolment in private schools.

Why the drop-out? Black families in certain states are reportedly leaving the public system to avoid the whitewashing of American history. Other black families in poorer areas report feeling afraid of school shootings which,

according to CNN “disproportionately affect urban schools and people of colour”.

The drop in public school attendance may also relate to a recent win for the Republican party: the introduction of education savings accounts (ESAs) for parents wishing to remove children from the (largely democratically-minded) public system.

With ESAs, parents who opt out of the public school system get several thousand dollars into a specific account they can use for private school tuition, homeschooling, or other education-related expenses.

The system was first introduced in West Virginia in 2021 and Arizona in 2022, and has continued with many more states — Iowa, Utah, Arkansas, Florida, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Indiana.

In many respects, homeschooling in America has taken on a deeply political character.

[European neighbours](#)

Our European neighbours offer a very different model.

In much of mainland Europe, the rights of the child are protected or balanced with the rights of the parents to educate. The European Court of Human Rights ruled against a German family from the state of Hesse that had been fighting for the right to homeschool their children, a practice that is illegal in Germany.



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The Wunderlich family argued the government had violated Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which guarantees protection for the privacy of home and family life, by forcing their children to attend school.

The court found, however, “the family had not provided sufficient evidence that the children were properly educated and socialised, and that a government removing children from their parents to ensure they receive an education did not violate Article 8”.

European countries vary hugely in their approach to homeschooling but the region is generally far stricter than our nearest British neighbours.

In Denmark for instance, parents are free to homeschool but are also required to engage with local authorities once or twice a year. The municipality is responsible for supervising the teaching through these regular inspections.

In Estonia, the focus is on the student and homeschooling is carried out under the supervision of a nearby school. The student is assessed every year and the school can terminate homeschooling if the child is found to have concerning deficits in their learning.

Homeschooling is technically illegal in Spain, as it is in Germany, but families in Spain are not prosecuted for doing it. As of September 2023, homeschooling is no longer legal in France.

Homeschooling in Switzerland has to be carried out in accordance with the local curriculum and, with few exceptions, in the official language.