

Disappearing into A BLACK HOLE

Fighting to get the best special educational needs provision for your child can be hard, and while support groups can help, they can also hinder, as one family found out. Richard Shrubb reports

There is an old proverb that basically states 'you can't change the world around you until you have changed yourself'. It stands to reason – if your own troubles consume you, you do not have time to help others. Andy and Dawn Dyer found this out earlier this year when, in exasperation at what they felt was the poor special educational needs (SEN) provision provided by their local education authority (LEA) on the Isle of Wight, they set up a Facebook group to complain.

Andy explains: "Within two weeks we had 100 families join the group. It showed to us that there really was a black hole in SEN services on the island."

The group became known as the SEN

Black Hole; but it was to cause the Dyers even more problems.

Patchy provision

Problems with SEN provision had come as a surprise to The Dyers. In Doncaster, where they previously lived, they had had a good relationship with their LEA and their autistic daughter Lauren received support in mainstream education. "The attitude in Doncaster was early intervention to prevent greater problems from coming in as our daughter grew up," Andy says.

Doncaster LEA worked closely with the Dyers and they were extremely happy with the service. They took it for granted that SEN provision was this way nationally.

But when the Dyers moved to the Isle

of Wight they found that it wasn't. For instance, Andy didn't like the choices of schools they were offered. He alleges one headmaster told him he had "too many of those sorts of children in this school", and after finding what they describe as "the best of a bad bunch", they found they had to fight hard to get any special treatment for Lauren, who suffered as a result.

"Lauren started to behave aggressively and developed selective mutism. We couldn't understand why this was happening," Andy adds.

Lauren's decline enabled her to be put in the SEN primary school – but only after a hard fight, supported by a social worker. The social worker says privately that a large part of his job is advocating for such families.

As the Dyers met other parents on the island it became apparent that they were not alone in their feelings towards the LEA over SEN provision. Andy says that "the policy of inclusion on the island is inclusion to the point of exclusion", with children that need SEN provision not being given special schooling when they could do better in that environment.

However, Isle of Wight Council states that its policy toward SEN provision reflects the Green Paper on it – 'Support and Aspiration: A new approach to special educational needs and disability' – published by the government in March. Dawn Cousins, council cabinet member for children's services says: "All this is in keeping with principles set out in the recently published government Green Paper. We are not hiding behind that or any other legislation.

"It is important to make sure the skills of staff at these excellent [SEN] schools are reserved for those most in need of such specialist care. We do not believe children with lesser needs will necessarily reach their full potential at these schools."

Referring to the SEN Black Hole group, Cousins says: "Though this group of parents clearly holds strong views about what is right for their children – and it is only natural that a parent should – the council does not accept there is a 'black hole' in provision as claimed."

But Dawn Dyer disagrees. "The council needs to stop pretending there is not an issue and work with us to give our children what they need and deserve.

"Of course special school provision should be there for those with the most acute needs, but there are also large numbers of children who are struggling to cope in mainstream settings because they do not fit into that category. That is what the black hole is all about and it is a very real phenomenon."

Victims of success

Judging by the numbers who joined the SEN Black Hole, it seemed many others agreed. Indeed, the group even briefly became national. "We observed there seemed to be a north/south divide in the UK, with northern LEAs favouring early intervention to prevent serious problems occurring in the child as they grew up, and southern LEAs holding off until too late, which would both

cost them more money in SEN provision and wreck the child's future," Andy says.

But with such a massive influx of members, the Dyers found themselves victims of their own success. With such a weight of expectation and anger behind them, what would they do about it?

"We set up a steering group among the membership to discuss what we should do," says Andy. Unfortunately, there was disagreement over whether to become a political pressure group or support group.

Meanwhile, other organisations on the island felt that the SEN Black Hole was treading on their territory as well. This makes Andy somewhat angry. "If the other organisations were doing what they should, then we wouldn't have been so successful in getting membership!"

In addition, the Dyers allege that the LEA was putting pressure on member families to stop campaigning via veiled threats to impact their education.

"At the same time we were fighting for Lauren's welfare and in my case working full-time and in Dawn's, doing a full-time social work degree."

It was this combination of personal and external pressures that forced the Dyers to close the group in April. Supporting 100 other families nationally in what had become a mutual support group was secondary in their lives.

Hope for change

But there is hope that the situation with SEN provision will change. The Green Paper suggests that special schools

will not be reserved for those in most need: "We will remove the bias towards inclusion and propose to strengthen parental choice by improving the range and diversity of schools from which parents can choose, making sure they are aware of the options available to them and by changing statutory guidance for local authorities."

It seems the government wants the choice to be down to the parents of children with SEN needs. The Green Paper proposes 'to give parents a real choice of school, either a mainstream or special school.' This goes against the attitude of the previous government, which felt that

there are large numbers of children (with SEN) who are struggling to cope in mainstream schools

special schooling led to exclusion.

This move would be welcomed by some parents. For instance, Ann Kerr, whose son has a speech and language disorder, says that her son does not want to mingle with children without SEN requirements. "He feels part of the group when he is with other kids of similar problems, and that he stands out among children who do not have those problems."

This shows that special schooling feels inclusive to some of those in receipt of it as they feel exposed in settings where all the other children are 'normal'.

About the author

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SEN Black Hole's five principal complaints

- 1) There are a large number of children on the Isle of Wight who are in either mainstream or home education, purely through the failure of the council to provide suitable educational placements.
- 2) The council is hiding behind the national inclusion policy and is trying to make our children adapt to settings – not creating or adapting settings to our children.
- 3) They do not recognise that mainstream education cannot meet all of our children's needs – even with full support, own work stations and visual timetables, our children cannot function in crowded, busy, loud and visually over-stimulating environments.
- 4) We need more special schools and more units attached to mainstream; this is not an either/or situation.
- 5) There are many parents who are angry at being patronised and ignored, made to feel that the challenging behaviours demonstrated by their children are their fault. These parents are not being listened to.