



RICHARD HOUSE IS AN EARLY YEARS CAMPAIGNER.

“Summer-borns are still losing out”

Richard House speaks to campaigner Michelle Melson about the ongoing struggle to amend the School Admissions Code...

RICHARD HOUSE [RH]: Michelle, are you as frustrated as I am that no government seems prepared to tackle this issue? – despite the fine words we keep hearing. Can you summarise the nature of the summer-borns issue for us?

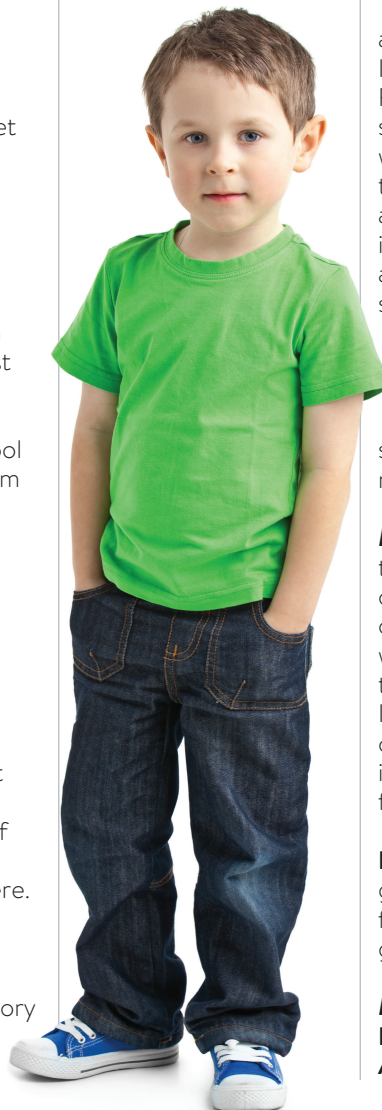
MICHELLE MELSON [MM]: Extremely frustrated, Richard. In a nutshell: some summer-born children in England are forced to miss a school year (and not just Reception class – any year), simply for starting school when they’re at compulsory school age. Successive governments have trumpeted flexibility for parents within the current system, but in full knowledge that the ‘flexibility’ they offer is ‘on paper’ only and lacks any real substance. This stems from an ambiguous school admission code that admission authorities can interpret just as they like, regardless of primary legislation – generating costly and time-consuming conflict with parents.

Children will continue to be forced to miss a year (any year) unless and until the school admissions code is amended, as was promised. Schools minister Nick Gibb said in September 2015 that “admissions rules must be changed so children born between April 1st and August 31st cannot be forced to go straight into Year 1 if they wait to start school until they turn five”; that “the existing system is not working” – “If they do start school later, the children will be able to remain with the same age group as they progress, including into secondary school”; and that “A consultation will now be carried out and the reforms will have to be approved by Parliament”. Over two years on, and we’re still waiting for that consultation.

RH: Before exploring what this government ‘resistance’ might be about, Michelle, can you explain what you mean by ‘regardless of primary legislation’? – as both parents and professionals need to know the full facts here.

MM: Yes, absolutely. The duty placed on parents regarding their child’s education is only in effect while their child is of compulsory school age, as per Section 7 of the Education Act 1996. Unfortunately, when

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parents of summer-born children request ‘admission outside of their normal year group’ (how it’s described in the School Admissions Code), many admission authorities believe they have powers to decide whether these children should start school early (at age four) or at compulsory school age. Yet that’s not in their gift. The only powers admission authorities have stem from provision 2.17 of the Code, which is to make a decision on the year group a summer-born should be admitted to (Reception or Year 1) when they begin to be of compulsory school age. This decision must be made in the best interests of the child.

It’s shocking how often we see admission authorities misinterpreting this. Interestingly, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 (primary legislation) states: “‘Reception class’ means a class in which education is provided which is suitable to the requirements of pupils aged five and any pupils under or over that age whom it is expedient to educate with pupils of that age”. The current system is essentially state-sanctioned discrimination.

RH: All this would be hard to make up, Michelle – and we (allegedly) live in a democracy? So why is government seemingly so determined to resist any real, substantive change?

MM: This year, the government stated that it was estimating potential costs, level of parental take-up, and whether those children take up ‘free early education’. So whilst still being ‘concerned’, it’s still giving the promised changes ‘careful consideration’. It would appear that money is the primary consideration, when in our view it’s the best interests of the children concerned, and their future life-chances, that should come first.

RH: Much more could be said about this government ‘resistance’, Michelle – but that’s for another time/interview! Thank you – and good luck with the campaign.

Michelle Melson co-leads the ‘Summer Born Campaign’, for amending the School Admissions Code. summerbornchildren.org

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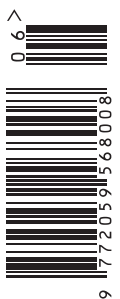
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