

A summary for school leaders and practitioners

High-SEND Schools: Patterns and Pressures

A growing number of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are concentrated in a relatively small number of mainstream schools.

As a result, these schools are facing increasing demands on staff, resources and specialist support.

This Research Bite summarises NFER's report, *High-SEND schools: Patterns and pressures in mainstream provision*, funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The research explores how and why pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools, and what it means for schools, pupils and families.



“Our research shows that responsibility for supporting pupils with SEND is not being shared evenly across the system. Instead, it is becoming concentrated in a minority of schools, creating significant and often unsustainable pressures on staff and resources.”

Matt Walker, Principal Investigator and Senior Research Manager at NFER

How are pupils with SEND currently distributed across mainstream schools and how has this changed over time?



The number of pupils identified with SEND in England has risen steadily over the last decade. In 2024/25, **more than 1.7 million pupils were identified as having SEND** - equivalent to around one in five pupils in the school system.



Alongside rising numbers of pupils with SEND, mainstream schools report increasing numbers of pupils with more complex needs, multiple learning challenges and levels of attainment below those typically expected for their age.



Schools with higher proportions of pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) tend to serve more deprived communities, particularly in the primary phase. They also tend to be smaller in the secondary phase and have lower levels of attainment than other schools.



Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools and that unevenness is growing. In 2024/25, schools with the highest proportions of pupils with EHCPs had around five to six times as many pupils with EHCPs as schools with the lowest proportions.

Why are pupils with SEND unevenly distributed across the school system?

Case study interviews suggest that pupils with SEND become concentrated in certain schools due to a combination of school, family and local factors.

These factors can reinforce one another over time, attracting families to some schools (**pull factors**) and discouraging them from others (**push factors**).



Pull factors

Schools with a strong inclusive ethos develop reputations for effectively meeting need. These reputations shape parental choice, professional advice and local authority placement decisions, drawing higher proportions of pupils with SEND to these schools. The presence of specialist units or resourced provision further strengthens this pull.



Push factors

Pupils are pushed towards certain schools when capacity in other schools is constrained. This is reinforced by variation in school practices, with some schools less willing to develop a reputation for inclusion or actively discouraging admission of pupils with SEND — whether due to capacity pressures or concerns about performance measures. As a result, inclusive mainstream schools become default options, particularly where they are perceived as flexible or have available places. Once pupils are placed in high-SEND schools (schools with above-average proportions of pupils with SEND compared with their local area and nationally), they are less likely to move, reinforcing concentration over time.

Why this happens: the "structural steering effect"

School ethos and reputation (Pull factors)



System capacity constraints e.g. lack of specialist provision (Push factors)



Pupils steered into certain schools



Rising EHCP (and SEN Support) concentrations in certain schools



Shortages of specialist provision, delays in EHCP processes and the pressure to secure placements limit local authority and parental choices.

Contextual factors

Differences in how schools identify and record SEND can affect how patterns appear in the data, while characteristics of local communities can also help explain differences in needs between schools.

What is the impact on schools and pupils?

The evidence suggests that concentrating pupils with SEND in a small number of schools increases both pressure on those schools and their capability.

High-SEND schools often develop strong inclusive practice and expertise, but face levels of strain that some describe as unsustainable.

Behavioural, safeguarding and wellbeing risks

High concentrations of pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) challenges, trauma histories and frequent dysregulation was associated with increased safeguarding complexity and greater demands on staff.

SEN units and resourced provisions

SEN units and resourced provisions can help schools build expertise and increase support for pupils with SEND. However, some schools report challenges in integrating this provision into mainstream school life, alongside staffing and resource pressures.

Equity and access

Schools with above average proportions of pupils with SEND often serve more disadvantaged communities, which can place extra pressure on staff, resources and support services. Families who are more confident navigating the system may also find it easier to access support, leading to different experiences for children.

Strength versus strain

Case study and survey evidence suggests that having higher numbers of pupils with SEND in the same school can help build strong inclusive cultures, develop staff expertise, and support pupils to feel a greater sense of belonging. However, higher levels of need can also increase workload and make classroom teaching more complex, putting pressure on the quality and sustainability of support over time.

Funding and system pressures

Schools with higher proportions of pupils with SEND face disproportionate financial pressure. Differences in local authority processes, in EHCP quality, and in monitoring create inconsistent experiences for both schools and families.

Shared responsibility for inclusion

Some schools support far more pupils with SEND than others, meaning that the responsibility for meeting pupils' needs is not shared equally across the system. This can create challenges for inclusive education, particularly where schools have different levels of resources, expertise and capacity to support pupils with SEND.

Around a quarter of schools reported limited interaction between pupils in SEN units and resourced provision and their mainstream peers, while over a third reported weak joint working between staff. These findings highlight potential challenges for inclusion bases.

Considerations for schools and trusts from the research

1 **Embed inclusion as a whole-school priority, in line with the white paper's expectation that every local school should be able to meet most children's needs.**

Senior leaders should make inclusion a clear priority, with defined ownership and regular review. Schools should build inclusion into curriculum design, behaviour policy, staffing, timetable decisions, and staff professional development.

2 **Strengthen and share SEND leadership responsibilities to help sustain effective support and reduce the need for reactive, crisis-driven responses.**

SENCO leadership time and administrative support could be protected within staffing and timetabling decisions. Schools may also wish to consider distributed SEND leadership roles to build capacity, share expertise and support sustainable provision, where this fits their context and structure.

Schools should establish clear processes for identifying needs, reviewing support and coordinating with external services, with agreed escalation routes for more complex cases. This may be particularly important where higher levels of need create additional behavioural or safeguarding pressures.

3 **Use data to identify pupils' needs early and provide support before difficulties become more serious.**

To reduce late or inconsistent identification and support, schools and trusts could:

- use a shared, data-informed approach to identify needs early.

- screen pupils on entry and at key transition points.
- establish clear processes for responding to teacher and parent concerns.
- monitor emerging needs and provide timely, targeted support.
- regularly review the impact of support and adjust where needed.
- ensure access to screening tools, specialist advice and regular SEND review meetings.

Some schools and trusts already have strong practice in these areas. The considerations above are intended to support further development, recognising that approaches will need to be adapted to local context, capacity and need. While the research identified examples of strong practice across the sector, the white paper suggests that a step-change in consistency and scale will be needed to embed an inclusive approach across the system.



"If we want a genuinely inclusive system, responsibility for SEND cannot rest with a few schools. It has to be something every school is expected – and supported – to do. Without that shift, the government's ambition for mainstream schools to better meet a wider range of needs will be difficult to deliver."

Matt Walker, Principal Investigator & Senior Research Manager at NFER

For full details of our recommendations for schools and policymakers, please read the full report on our website.



This Research Bite is a summary of the High-SEND schools: [Patterns and pressures in mainstream provision report](#), written by Matt Walker, Jenna Julius, Sarah Tang, Rachel Classick and Megan Lucas. The project involved analysis of data from the Department for Education's National Pupil Database, a national survey of 800 senior school leaders and SENCOs, and 97 interviews with school leaders, SENCOs, middle leaders, parents and local authority staff. Other research on SEND can be found on the Publications and Research page on our [website](#).



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