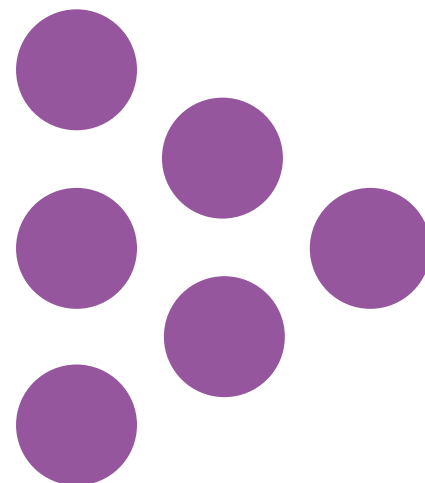

High-SEND schools

Emerging insights

Understanding the uneven distribution of pupils with SEND across England's mainstream schools

Matt Walker

14 April 2026



Research questions



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



2. What are the factors driving this distribution of pupils across the school system?



3. What are the implications of the current distribution of pupils with SEND on schools and pupils?

Project strands

1. Quantitative analysis

to understand the characteristics of 'high SEND' schools and the movements of pupils with SEND

3. School case studies

in 15 'high-SEND schools' with interviews in 18 comparator schools

2. Local authority interviews

With 10 staff in nine local authorities with a large spread of SEND across schools

4. National survey of school leaders and SENCOs

in 'high-SEND schools' and comparator schools (800 responses)

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

SEND pupils are unevenly distributed across mainstream schools

-
- **Mainstream schools are now educating a growing share of pupils with the highest levels of need**
 - 56% of pupils with EHCPs are now in mainstream schools, up from 49% in 2015/16.
 - **System pressures are concentrated in a subset of “high-SEND schools” rather than shared evenly across the system**
 - Primary schools with the highest EHCP rates have over six times as many EHCP pupils as those with the lowest rates; secondary schools show a five-fold difference.
 - **Emergence of distinct (but overlapping) “high-SEND” school types**
 - **‘High EHCP’ schools (HES):** schools with higher proportions of pupils with EHCPs as compared to both their catchment area and nationally; and
 - **‘High-any-SEND’ schools (HASS):** schools with higher-than-expected numbers of pupils with SEN Support and/or EHCPs.

2. What are the factors driving the distribution of pupils with SEND across the school system?

Why SEND becomes concentrated in some mainstream schools

Core mechanism: structural steering

School ethos and reputation (Push factors)



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



Pupils steered into certain schools



Rising EHCP (and SEN Support) concentrations in certain schools

Primary driver: Inclusive ethos and reputation

School leaders' perspective

- Strong commitment to inclusion: *"We never say we can't meet need."*
- Having a SEN unit or RP further attracts pupils: *"We were getting fuller and fuller with special needs children."*

System response

- Parents and LA officers identify these schools as safe placements.
- Expertise attracts further referrals.

Result

- Success reinforces demand; SEND intake grows cumulatively.

Secondary drivers: System capacity and sufficiency pressures

Local authority perspective

- Limited specialist places.
- Need to secure placements quickly.

System dynamics

- Schools with space or flexibility receive more pupils: *“We always have space, so we acquire students who’ve struggled in other settings.”*
- Inclusive schools become default option.

Key message

- Capacity constraints elsewhere steer pupils toward inclusive mainstream settings.

Push factors

3. What are the implications of the current distribution of pupils with SEND on schools and pupils?

Benefits of high-SEND schools: views of staff and parents

Inclusive ethos and community strengths

Positive peer relationships and social norms

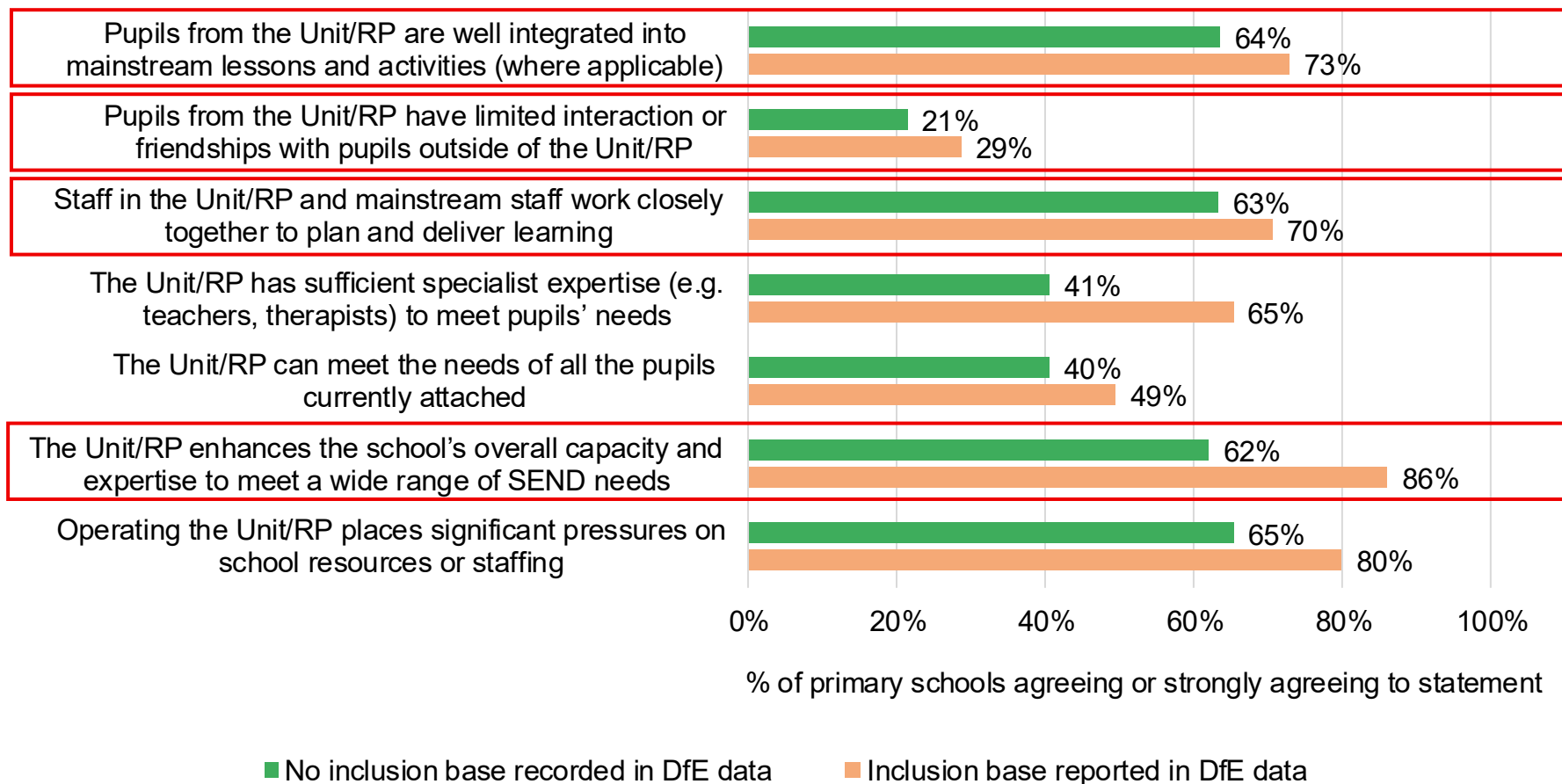
Staff expertise and professional development

Pupil outcomes (beyond academics)

Benefits for non-SEND pupils

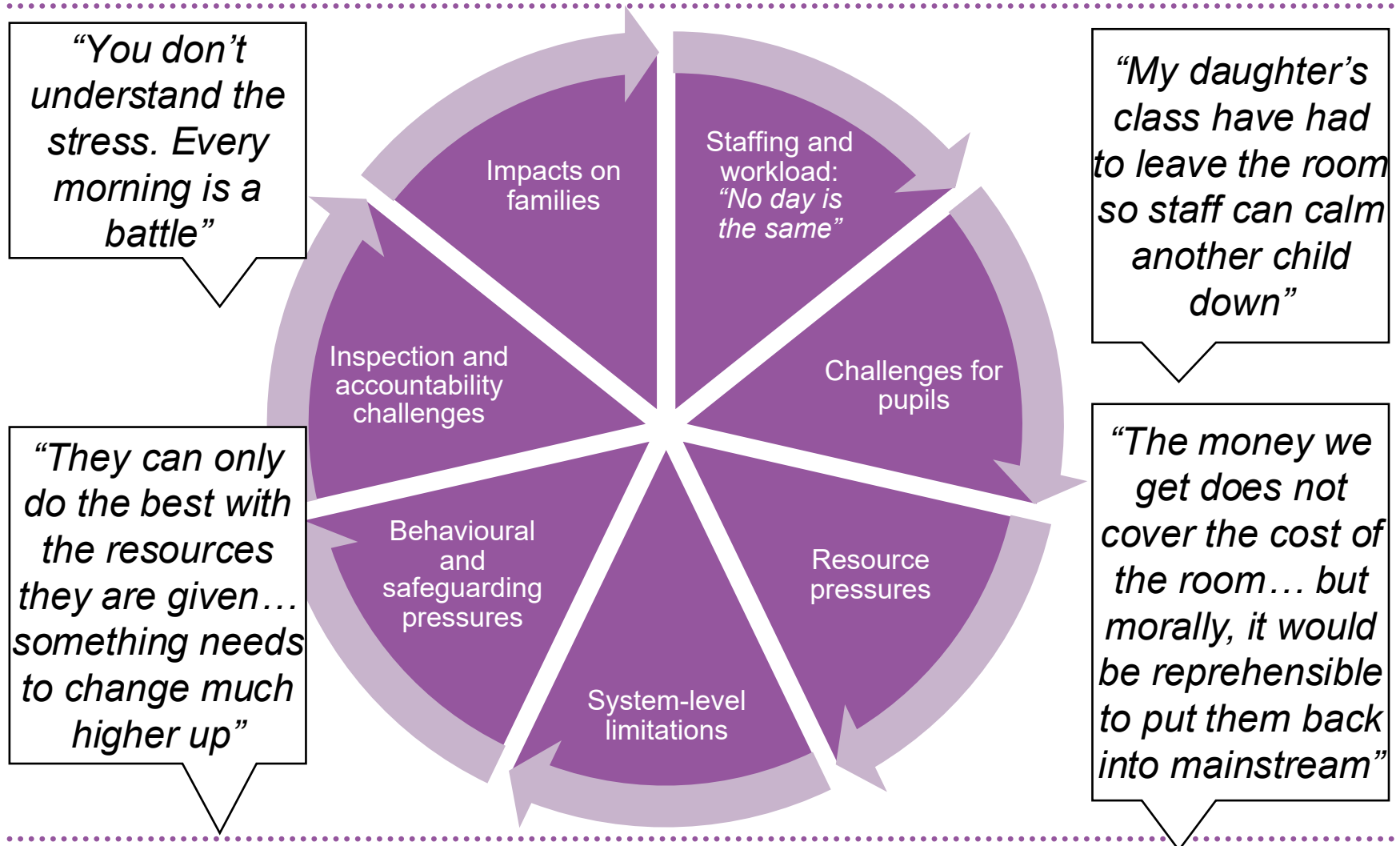
Positive impacts on families

Survey evidence for the benefits of inclusion bases is mixed



Challenges

Challenges in high-SEND schools: views of staff and parents



Conclusions

Distribution:

- Pupils with SEND are unevenly distributed across England's mainstream schools.

Drivers:

- Capacity and sufficiency pressures steer placements toward inclusive mainstream schools, raising EHCP and SEN Support proportions in some settings.

Implications:

- Uneven distribution puts disproportionate pressure on some schools, affecting capacity and pupil experience.
- High-SEND schools build strong inclusive practice but face unsustainable strain, so the current distribution is neither efficient nor equitable for schools or pupils.

The schools white paper may help address the unequal SEND distribution

The reforms have the potential to help by:

- **Levelling up early intervention** so families don't need EHCPs to access support.
- **Raising inclusion expectations for all schools**, reducing reputational clustering.
- **Expanding the SEND workforce** so support is not concentrated in a few schools.
- **Providing universal specialist access**, reducing reliance on schools with strong historic SEND reputations.

But the reforms may also create additional pressures for high-SEND schools:

- **Workload implications** of new ISPs and review of EHCPs by secondary SENCOs.
- **Limitations in SENCO capacity** present a critical risk to the effective implementation of these reforms.

More needs to be done to directly target the structural, parental, and school-level mechanisms our research identifies as sources of uneven distribution.



Evidence for excellence in education

© National Foundation for Educational Research 2026

All rights reserved. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without prior written permission of NFER.

The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ
T: +44 (0)1753 574123 • F: +44 (0)1753 691632 • enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk

