

Effective SEN support: research evidence on effective approaches and examples of current practice in good and outstanding schools and colleges

A guide for senior leaders in education settings

The DfE and authors do not endorse interventions that have been included in this resource: the purpose of the resource is to make the academic evidence base as clear as possible, and to share what other practitioners have found works for them so that you can make informed choices.

Any practitioner views presented e.g. within case studies, are solely their own and not those of the DfE or authors.

This document does not cover all of the research, approaches, interventions or guidance that exists concerning SEND. However, for the first time, it tries to pull together a range of information into What Works for learners on SEN support.

Because this document is based on current research and is not endorsed by DfE, there may be instances where information this resource contains does not mirror published DfE policy. The decisions on what interventions are right for a specific child or institution remain a local decision. This resource pulls together a range of information but does not imply that specific institutions must use these approaches nor place any expectation or direction on the uses of institution level budgets.

Evidence about what has worked in the past, with a specific group of pupils and students in specific circumstances, offers no guarantee that an approach will work in other circumstances or with specific pupils and students, especially given the breadth and mix of needs within the SEND group. You are encouraged to look at the detail of interventions and approaches to consider what would be most beneficial in your setting and for each of your learners.



SEN SUPPORT: GUIDE FOR SENIOR LEADERS

Introduction

As a leader it is vital that you have the latest evidence available to you so that you can make evidence-based decisions to enable the children and young people you support to reach their best possible outcomes.

This document summarises findings from a summary of published research, referred to as 'what the evidence says', and advice from experts and schools and colleges displaying promising practice, referred to as 'what the sector says'. It is designed to inform the decisions you make and to enable you to share best practice within your organisation.

The research found **7 key ingredients of effective SEN support**. This document sets out some key findings under each of these headings, linking throughout to the more detailed tool.

1. Inclusive culture, leadership and management
2. High quality teaching
3. Use of expertise
4. Personalisation
5. Flexible use of evidence-based strategies
6. Progress tracking
7. Communication and collaboration

These strategic ingredients hinge on the culture created by leaders. When the ingredients were in place, practice was more likely to be effective; when not in place, there was a limit to how much benefit any individual practice could have.

It is clear that practice, approaches, interventions and programmes of support for learners with SEN vary greatly due to

- The size and make-up of the setting
- The specific needs of individual learners and
- The knowledge, skills and experience of staff

What all advice, guidance and research shows is the importance of getting to know individual learners and developing a package of support to meet their specific needs.

Learners on SEN support are those whose special educational needs and/or disabilities mean they need help in school which is different or additional to other learners of the same age. Learners with a learning disability or difficulty are those who require special educational provision to be made for them which is additional or different to support usually available to young people of the same age in mainstream colleges. We use the term 'SEN support' to refer to both these groups of learners (although we appreciate it is not a term commonly used in colleges).

The term 'SEN Support' describes the action taken to support pupils and students who have been identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), but who do not have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan. In primary and secondary schools, the SEN Support cohort makes up around 12% of the school population. Over 19% of 16-19 year olds in Further Education (FE) colleges have a self-declared learning disability or difficulty (referred to as LDD, but within this report included in the term SEN support). This research considered how pupils and students on SEN Support are being supported in schools and colleges to overcome barriers to learning and achieve good outcomes.

This document brings together the key findings from a large-scale investigation to find out What Works in SEN support in an accessible summary for leaders. It accompanies the Effective SEN support: research evidence on effective approaches; and examples of current practice in good and outstanding schools and colleges tool for teachers and those working with, and making decisions about the support for, children and young people on SEN Support

KEY INGREDIENT 1: Inclusive culture, leadership and management

“Every teacher is a teacher of children with SEN and disabilities”

Justine Greening, Secretary of State for Education, to the College of Teaching.

What the sector says:

Effective schools and colleges have a strong commitment to SEND and have it as a school or college ‘high priority’. They see supporting pupils and students with SEND as integral to the success of their school or college and not as an ‘add on’. This means the senior leadership having a clear vision and ethos for SEND within their setting, which is reflected in their policies, staffing and funding structures, governance and frontline delivery practices.

Everyone in the school or college shares the same drive for high quality support and outcomes for pupils and students with SEND, and everyone is clear what their role is in achieving this. The Senior Leadership team has good representation for pupils and students with SEND on it, often including the SENCO or Additional Learning Support Manager (ALSM). Leaders lead by example and allocate staff, resources and time in a way that best supports all learners.

What the evidence says:

The SEND Code of Practice advises that schools and colleges should provide a culture with high expectations for students with SEND and must facilitate participation and achievement.

Creating a truly inclusive classroom is challenging. Most research focusing on classroom climate does not focus on supporting learners with SEND.

However, there are applicable lessons from this literature: these include the need to create environments where learners feel emotionally safe, the importance of clear rules and predictable consequences and the value of setting positive goals.

Schools and colleges have made more use in recent years of techniques to support mixed ability teaching, such as collaborative learning or peer tutoring. Peer tutoring needs to be carefully planned and managed. Learners with SEND can be effective tutors, particularly when tutoring younger children, and this can help build confidence and consolidate knowledge.

An issue often raised is the role of mixed ability groupings vs. setting by ability. The EEF report on setting or streaming indicates that in most cases setting disadvantages lower achieving learners. Being in lower sets is associated with lower self-belief on the part of learners, as well as lower expectations from teachers <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit/setting-or-streaming/>

Teaching Assistants (TAs) and Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) form a significant part of the workforce and provide much of the support for children with SEND. These support staff can provide benefits to children with SEND, but need to be appropriately supported to do so. They can deliver structured, evidence-based interventions to individuals or small groups but need proper training, thorough knowledge of the child’s strengths and weaknesses, adequate planning and preparation time and to be working as part of the wider support team.

EEF has produced a review and guidance on the effective use of TAs <http://maximisingtas.co.uk/resources.php>



KEY INGREDIENT 2. High quality teaching

“We are proud of our inclusive education. Our exciting courses, highly specialist staff and innovative practice ensures all learners have the best possible chance to be successful.” - College Principal

What the sector says

Good and outstanding schools and colleges considered to be displaying promising practice have teaching staff who are knowledgeable and well-informed about supporting individual needs i.e. they can identify barriers to learning, match needs to appropriate support and effectively monitor and review progress. Individual teachers take responsibility for the progress and achievement of all of the pupils and students they teach and have the skill to appropriately tailor and differentiate their teaching to suit pupils and students with SEND.

What the evidence says

The evidence about high quality teaching and adaptations that can support learners with SEND is significantly less extensive than that on interventions. See the research evidence here.

However, there is a growing body of evidence that a learner’s motivation and engagement are key factors in how they respond to support or intervention. Motivation can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic, with intrinsic motivation being associated with good academic progress. Pupils and students with SEND often have lower intrinsic motivation so this needs to be fostered in them.

Ideas of what this looks like in practice

High quality teaching and differentiation in schools

Downside Primary School has guidance for teachers which states:

- Plan the structure of the day in order to give individual and group help as appropriate
- Where possible use visual supports
- Match child and task very carefully
- Have additional extension material available for fast workers
- Build success into task to give confidence and reduce any risk of failure
- Introduce new skills in small stages
- Proceed in steps from the ‘known’
- Use practical demonstration where possible
- Ensure generalisation of skill to other tasks where appropriate
- Make sure pupils are paying attention before trying to teach a new skill
- Keep careful records to ensure continuity and progression
- Set realistic time targets for completing work
- Praise and reward often – make rewards relevant to the child
- Provide feedback immediately and in a positive way
- Evaluate and review the work set and the achievement made
- Accommodate different learning styles

KEY INGREDIENT 3. Use of Expertise

“All teaching staff are to be aware of specialised needs. All teaching staff carry out the SENCO role in their own class.” - Primary Headteacher

What the sector says:

Schools and colleges displaying promising practice have a range of staff across teams who are knowledgeable about SEND so that capacity is not just concentrated amongst a few staff. Staff are well trained, with regular professional development opportunities from various sources, covering theory as well as practice. Staff are sufficiently equipped and supported to be effective, with clear processes for how and when they should work with other specialists. The SENCO or ALSM is used as a consultant, advising and supporting other staff rather than delivering support directly to pupils and students.

Ideas of what this looks like in practice

External support in schools

Low Moor Primary School refers to specialist services where it is evident from reviews of the support put in place that further intervention or recommendations are necessary.

In using external support, it is considered important that the school:

- Facilitates the work of external providers by giving them an effective space to work in and ensuring that they are able to observe the child, meet with the child's parents and engage with staff who know the child well
- Implements all recommendations included in reports that are received
- Communicates these to the staff that work with the child

Fir Vale Secondary Academy has a well-equipped SEND team that includes expertise on the staff. It comprises:

- A SENCO, who is also an Assistant Head teacher
- A Leader of SEND, who has extensive special education experience and is a qualified Dyslexia tutor
- A Teacher of the Deaf
- A KS4 Alternative provision mentor
- A pastoral team
- A designated member of staff for safeguarding.

External support in colleges

Preston's College has access to a number of external agencies on site including:

- Addaction - a confidential service for young people to offer advice and guidance relating to alcohol and drug use.
- Minds Matter - a frontline NHS support service implementing therapeutic treatment options for people suffering with common mental health difficulties.

Other agencies are accessed as required e.g. Disability Equality, Children/Adult Social Care, Occupational Health Practitioners, Speech and Language Specialists, Youth Offending Team, RNIB, Probation Service, Dieticians, Epilepsy Nurses, Abbott Nurses and Barnados.



KEY INGREDIENTS 4. Personalisation

“We get to know every learner here. And not just their name, but what they like doing, what they struggle with, how they want to be helped, what football team they support or band they like, and what’s going on at home”
- Secondary Senior Leader

What the sector says:

Schools and colleges displaying promising practice have individually tailored packages of high quality support that address the whole range of a child or young person’s needs. These are developed through staff building up a thorough understanding of their pupils’ and students’ needs.

They have high expectations for pupils and students in terms of progress, achievements and outcomes. They support them to develop independence and transition smoothly between settings and into adulthood. Successes are celebrated and issues are dealt with in an appropriate way for each learner.

Pupils and students and their families are treated as partners, with their contribution to the development and implementation of support respected and valued: it is understood that everyone is working towards the same goal.

Personalisation is made possible through thorough assessment of learners’ needs, experiences and preferences. Read more about this part of the Graduated Approach here.

Ideas of what this looks like in practice

Tailored support in schools

The Sweyne Park School (secondary) has a Year 8 student who has been sight impaired from birth. Teachers are advised to ensure:

- There is a clear visual field and work environment free from clutter
- Printed materials are in font size 24 or above - support can be provided for staff to do this and they have details of how to order correctly sized textbooks
- Additional time is given to complete work (and in exams)
- The learner sits at the front of the class, directly facing the board
- Teachers use the thick black line when writing on the whiteboard
- The learner is allowed to come up to the whiteboard if needed

Tailored support in colleges

Myerscough College is supporting a 17 year old on a Level 3 Sport and Fitness course. The learner has been assessed as having interaction and cognition needs that are leading to social and emotional issues. The support they have in place includes the following:

- All handouts are printed on yellow paper (and a yellow overlay has been provided)
- All assignments are marked using the Dyslexia Marking Guidelines
- Tutors repeat verbal instructions and write them down in a ‘to-do’ style list where appropriate
- 1:1 support is provided in all theory lessons for note taking, reading and scribing
- The learner has been provided with an iPad for use in lessons and out of class to support with academic work. A range of Apps have been downloaded onto the iPad to assist and promote independence
- The learner is allowed to submit all work electronically
- Extra time is allowed in lessons for completing reading and writing tasks.
- Tutors are encouraged to consider alternative assessments to allow the learner to better demonstrate knowledge
- Tutors highlight key words so the learner is aware of their meaning and how to spell them correctly
- Feedback is “constructive and positive” and does not focus on spelling and grammatical errors

KEY INGREDIENTS 5. Flexible use of evidence-based strategies

“We believe every pupil is a vulnerable learner in some form or other. We are very inclusive. We try to limit the amount of time that any child is withdrawn from the classroom. There are very few formal interventions.” - Primary Headteacher

What the sector says:

Schools and colleges displaying promising practice implement a graduated approach, in that pupils and students are regularly assessed and any issues with their learning are identified early. Support strategies are then chosen to address specific needs with bespoke packages developed, reviewed and revised at an individual level. All support and interventions are delivered by trained staff, with their focus and desired outcomes all being clearly shared and understood. Withdrawal from, and disruption to, mainstream learning is minimal and the impacts (academic and personal) robustly monitored.

What the evidence says:

It may be assumed that training to remediate a particular ‘weakness’ (e.g. motor skills in handwriting, phonological skills in reading, memory skills in learning) will automatically improve the target academic skill, but this is not necessarily the case. Instead the evidence often suggests training needs to explicitly link the tasks being practised to an academic skill - e.g. phonological training is most effective when explicitly linked to spelling/reading.

See our resource for practitioners for further details of evidence based practice around the graduated approach to support and approaches to use with students with various SEN.

Ideas of what this looks like in practice

Flexible use of strategies in colleges

In colleges students build up strong relationships with their Inclusive Learning Team link person, and/or their tutor. Between them they develop a picture of the students’ needs and support preferences, what has and has not worked for them in the past, and how they will best be supported to achieve their desired outcomes.

Packages of support are offered in taught and vocational settings as well as additionally ‘out of class’ (usually at the Learning Centre).

This support may involve:

- Offering a range of courses at different levels and with different delivery formats
- Tutors differentiating the content and delivery of their teaching, as well as students being provided with additional support to access learning (whether by use of a LSA or assistive technology)
- Extra support and/or input for key transferable skills (such as additional literacy and numeracy interventions), and/or course content (such as pre-teaching, re-covering and reinforcing material covered)
- Specific interventions to support their needs (such as with counselling and other mental health support)

Progress and impact of the interventions is monitored, with the support package tailored to best suit each student.

KEY INGREDIENTS 6. Progress tracking

“We enable everyone to enjoy learning to their full potential. Our ethos of empowerment enables learners to take control of their own learning, manage their LDD and develop skills to become independent learners”

- College Principal

What the sector says:

Schools and colleges identified as having promising practice regularly collect data to facilitate the early identification of need. Their assessments provide a full, rounded picture of each pupil or student’s needs. Information on progress is collated, monitored and used to underpin decisions. Robust systems are in place for using data to identify, review and assess impact and progress, and to monitor all the strategies and interventions being used with pupils and students (from individual to whole cohort and setting-wide level). There are clear systems of accountability for providing and using these data and strategies.

What the evidence says:

School and colleges have their own systems for data collection and monitoring progress. However, the DfE notes that ‘Excessive data collection and processing takes teachers, school leaders, and officials away from more productive tasks.’ Schools and colleges should therefore consider carefully the most effective method for data collection and monitoring. The DfE has publications on teacher workload that relate to this <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/teacher-workload-new-measures-announced>

The EEF has guidance on providing feedback and monitoring pupil progress

Ideas of what this looks like in practice

Progress monitoring in schools

The types of data tracking systems primary schools use include:

- P-scales - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/p-scales-attainment-targets-for-pupils-with-sen>
- An online STAR jar used to monitor progress - basic, intermediate or advanced - towards set objectives (as a reward or star jar used in class would)
- Customised data systems, such as <http://www.edsuk.co.uk>
- CPOMS - <http://www.cpoms.co.uk> for logging child protection concerns or any other concerns e.g. about children’s learning

Secondary schools track progress through:

- Regular performance assessments and work scrutiny
- Tests relevant to areas of need taken pre- and post- interventions
- SIMS <http://www.capita-sims.co.uk>
- Local systems for monitoring and measuring small steps of progress

Progress monitoring in colleges

Colleges track progress through:

- Planning reviews - to record and review personal learning targets with the student
- Performance management meetings and termly review Boards to look at the progress of all students (which Inclusive learning mentors / LSAs) attend

KEY INGREDIENTS 7. Communication and collaboration

“Every learner is special and needs special support that suits them.”

- Secondary Headteacher

What the sector says:

In good and outstanding schools and colleges with promising practice all staff (internal and external), other agencies, families and children and young people share information and form trusted and supportive relationships. Information is shared between these parties in various ways but consistently. Everyone working for the best interests of the pupil or student is clear what action is being taken to help them, why that action has been chosen and what the longer term aims are. Support is therefore focused and any issues are dealt with at the earliest possible stage.

What the evidence says:

Parents are best placed to provide details on the health and early development of their child, particularly when the school or college is first assessing their child’s needs. They can provide information on whether difficulties have been noted at home or elsewhere to understand if they are limited to, or exacerbated by, the school or college environment.

Parents can also provide support and consistency for any approaches or interventions used at school or college. An EEF report indicates parental involvement in children’s learning has a small positive effect, though most of these focus on young children and reading.

Carers sometimes need support to know how best to support their child. Maloney et al (2015) find parents who are anxious about maths and help their child with maths homework can actually have a negative, rather than positive impact, for example.

Ideas of what this looks like in practice

Methods of communicating with children, young people and families

Several schools and colleges have established forums for those working with learners with SEND. They focus on key issues for families and may involve advice or learning sessions.

Schools and colleges are also using questionnaires to learners and their carers to get feedback on services and support being delivered. They use responses to underpin development of provision and feedback on what changes have been made based on their suggestions.

Additional methods used in colleges

Some colleges also use methods such as:

- ProMonitor <https://www.oneadvanced.com/products/proportal/> containing all learners’ one page profiles on their information system
- All teaching staff are sent a sheet of photos of the learners in their class. “A pink dot is added to photos of any learners who have support needs. By clicking on this dot staff are instantly linked to more detailed information on the learner”



Whole-setting support for learners on SEN support

The combination of having these features in place means that schools and colleges have developed a 'whole-setting' approach to SEND which includes:

- Re-organisation and staffing restructures
- Whole school learning environments
- Approaches to learning
- Celebrating success
- Promoting well-being
- Considering non-taught times (with safe havens, homework clubs and non-academic extracurricular opportunities)
- Preparation for transition and for adulthood
- Varying the curriculum offer
- Developing a 'resource base' or 'learning centre'
- Positively representing SEND
- Pupil voice opportunities.

Read examples of what these look like in practice and the evidence base for different approaches to support here [LINK to resource]

Whole setting support in schools

Low Moor Primary School has a range of tools that can be used to assess barriers to learning including:

For Cognition and Learning:

- Vernon graded/single word spelling tests
- Working memory tests
- ELKLAN blank level questioning
- Dyslexia screener

For Communication and Interaction:

- Locally developed Local Authority resources

For Social, Emotional and Mental Health:

- Boxall profile
- Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

Whole setting support in schools

St James' secondary school uses time out cards as a way for a learner to show that they need to take a break or leave the learning space. This may be due to anxiety issues, sensory overload or as part of a system for behaviour management. Rather than having to explain to the staff what is going on and how they feel, or losing control of their behaviour, learners simply show the Time Out card and are allowed to leave the class.



When a student leaves the class s/he is expected to find a member of the pastoral support team or SEN team (in their respective areas of the school). The member of staff they report to will allow the student time to "gather themselves" and then speak about what caused the issue, how they feel and what would help them next time.

Ideally, the aim is to get the learner to reflect on the situation and return to class when they feel better and/or have calmed down. This will be followed up (immediately or at a later date) with a discussion about how similar situations can be prevented in future.

If the learner cannot go back into the class, then their work is brought out for them to complete in a different place. All uses of the Time Out card are logged and monitored. This means that patterns of use can be identified: do they regularly come out of maths on a Monday? If so, is there a problem with maths? The teaching environment? The teacher? Their peers in that lesson? Mondays?

The data is used to have informed discussions with the learner, and potentially their family, to see how issues can be addressed, or as part of improving teacher performance.

Whole setting support for learners on SEN support

Whole setting support in colleges

Gloucestershire college considers it important to reduce the anxiety of students and parents around starting at a new placement. They have therefore put a lot of effort into preparing learners for the transition to college and the welcome they receive.

Learners are:

- Sent pictures of their tutors and staff who are going to be working with them well in advance of their start
- Provided with their timetables so they can start to plan their time and routine
- Invited to open days, taster events and chances to meet staff and look round the college.

The transition team has produced a virtual tour of the college, with special focus on the areas of the college that learners will need to become familiar with - e.g. their curriculum areas, the learning support centre, and communal spaces. The college has made this video into a virtual reality tour which can be experienced through a headset (as if the student is really walking around the college).

These 'innovative' tools have been found to be useful for students whose anxiety makes them less keen to visit or attend college in person and for school refusers.



Access the full resource for mainstream staff here [▶](#)

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