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Why provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities is broken in England – and how to fix it

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The capacity of the education sector to meet the needs of children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities is broken, according to education secretary [Bridget Phillipson](#).

According to the latest [report](#) on education and children's social care from education regulator Ofsted, a total of 389,000 children in England have an education health care plan (EHCP).

Children with EHCPs are those with the most complex needs, who have undergone a statutory assessment by their local authority. Additional support and funding is subsequently provided to meet the needs outlined on the EHCP. However, the Ofsted report also states that an additional 1,180,000 children have been identified with special needs but do not have an EHCP.

The [report](#) lays out the issues that schools are facing. More children are being identified as having special educational needs and disabilities, especially since the COVID pandemic.



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These children face delays in accessing services such as speech and language therapy, educational psychology and mental health services. There is a shortage of special schools, meaning that too many children are being educated in mainstream schools or alternative provision which is not designed to meet their needs.

A [2024 survey](#) by school leaders' union NAHT found that 99% of the over 1,000 headteachers and other school leaders in England surveyed felt that they received insufficient funding to meet the needs of pupils with special needs. Nearly 80% said that they had reduced their number of teaching assistants, or the hours they worked. These support staff play a [vital role](#) in supporting children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Since the 2014 Children and Families Act reformed special needs provision, the number of children with EHCPs has [risen by 140%](#) and academic outcomes for pupils with special needs have not improved. This is despite the introduction of the [special educational needs and disabilities code of practice](#) in 2014 which required schools to improve attainment.



Academic attainment is measured in very specific ways. arrowsmith2/Shutterstock

There are significant issues with the current school curriculum and assessment system that make it extremely difficult for pupils with special educational needs. Children with special educational needs and disabilities may be withdrawn from their class for educational support which means they are marked as “different” and miss out on valuable classroom experiences. They may have lower self-esteem as a result.

The curriculum, and how it is assessed, prioritises understanding of a narrow set of subjects, expressed in a very specific way. Academic attainment in mathematics and English exams is still viewed as the “gold standard”. Until we have a wider conception of what counts as educational success, many learners with special needs will continue to be marginalised.

The new government has launched a review of curriculum and assessment. It must take a razor-sharp focus on special educational needs. This is a crucial opportunity to give serious consideration to what an inclusive curriculum might look like for all pupils. The review should provide the opportunity to reflect on how academic, vocational and life skills can be measured in a more inclusive way.

Areas of focus

In some cases, the government needs to address the underlying factors which cause special educational needs. Extensive research has been carried out into the causes of mental ill health in children, for instance, which include poverty, parental conflict and difficulties in school, including as a result of narrow measures of success such as exams.

A recent report on special needs provision, commissioned by regional government membership organisations the County Councils Network and the Local Government Association contains recommendations that are worthy of serious consideration by the government.

These include the creation of a National Institute of Inclusive Education, an independent body which would develop a toolkit of best practice for special needs education. Another recommendation is a “core offer” of support from professionals such as therapists that schools could access for a pupil without needing to have a EHCP in place.

Other steps are also needed. Improving the training of all teachers, both in-service and during initial teacher training, will help them to meet the needs of pupils with special needs in mainstream schools.

Expanding specialist special educational needs and disabilities provision, including developing more special schools for pupils with complex needs, will alleviate the pressures on mainstream schools and ensure that children and young people are able to learn in settings which are designed to meet their needs.

The government needs to pay attention to the desperate struggles schools are facing in their special educational needs and disabilities provision. Investment in these services is urgently required.