



Tackling disadvantage in education

A toolkit for governing boards

**Special educational
needs and disabilities**

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NGA is the national membership association for governors, trustees and governance professionals in England's state schools and trusts.

We empower those in school and trust governance with valuable resources, expert support and e-learning. Together, we're raising standards and shaping stronger governance to ensure every pupil can thrive today – and tomorrow.

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NGA would like to thank 9000 Lives for providing their expertise and support in the production of this toolkit.

9000 Lives is dedicated to creating a world where every child and young person with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) has the opportunity to thrive. They work alongside families, schools, and communities to understand the unique challenges faced by those with SEND and to champion inclusive practices that enable young people to reach their full potential.

9000lives.org

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit is part of a series aimed at tackling disadvantage in education. It identifies the link between special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and educational disadvantage, signposts useful resources, and includes questions for governing boards to explore.

We recommend that you first read our [Widening the lens guidance](#) which explains how to identify key areas of disadvantage in your organisation. [Other toolkits in this series](#) cover **poverty, mental health and wellbeing, vulnerability** and **ethnicity**.

Making the link

A [National Audit Office report in autumn 2024](#) indicated that the SEND system is not yet delivering better outcomes for pupils with SEND.

Governing boards must use 'best endeavours' (do everything they can) to ensure that pupils with SEND get the support they need. As well as ensuring individual needs are catered for, this includes ensuring educational disadvantage that is a result of SEND is tackled.




Children with SEND are usually eligible for one of two levels of support:

- **SEN support:** Offered if the pupil has a learning difficulty or a disability *and* needs extra support to meet their full potential.
- **Education, health and care plans (EHCP):** For pupils whose more complex needs cannot be met by first-line SEN support and necessitates a formal assessment to be conducted.

As there is no legal framework around SEN support offered by schools, pupils with additional needs who do not have the legal support of an EHCP are statistically more likely to be at a disadvantage in their education.

Regardless of the level of support required, schools have a legal duty, in line with the Equalities Act, to make reasonable adjustments for pupils with a disability.

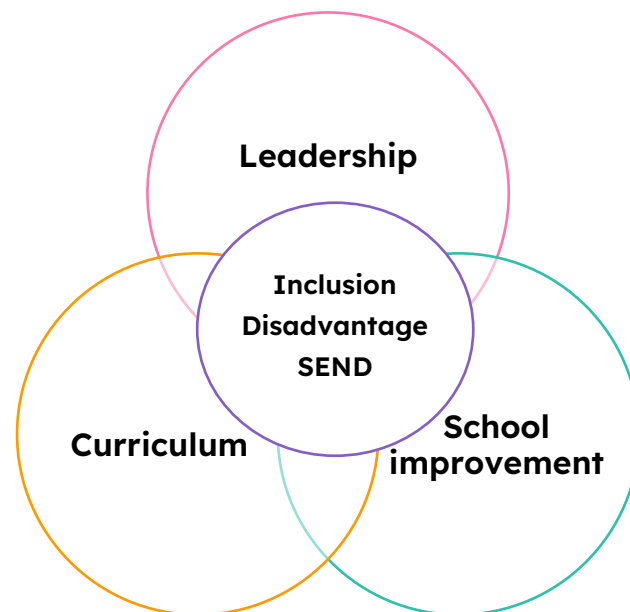
1. What the evidence tells us

- DfE data show that there are over **434,000 children with an EHC plan** in England's schools and there are **over 1.2 million children with SEN support** ([DfE, 2024](#)). 
- Additional government funding allocated since 2019 has not improved outcomes for pupils with SEND. **There is a vicious cycle of late intervention, low confidence, and inefficient resource allocation across the SEND system** ([SEND & Alternative Provision Improvement Plan, 2023](#)).
- By the end of reception year, children receiving SEN support were **over a year behind their peers** with no identified SEN in 2023. This gap grows to a year and a half by the end of primary school and to almost two years by the end of secondary school ([EPI, 2024](#)).
- The gap for pupils who have an EHCP is even wider than for pupils at the SEN support stage. At the end of primary school the gap is over two years and over 3 years by the end of secondary ([EPI, 2024](#)).
- In 2023, **17% of pupils with SEN achieved grades 5 or above** in English and mathematics GCSEs, compared to 51% of pupils with no identified SEN ([DfE, 2024](#)).
- Children with SEN are **more likely to be excluded from school** ([Timpson Review, 2019](#)).
 - Parents of children with SEND were far more likely to have skipped meals, rationed the heating, used a food bank or taken out debt than parents of children who do not have SEND ([National Parent Survey, 2024](#)). 
- Parents of children with SEND are **less likely (66%) to feel they had been given sufficient support** when they started at their current school. ([Parent Voice Report, 2022](#)).
- Disabled children are **less likely to say they that they like PE and games** in schools compared to their non-disabled peers (47% vs 60%) ([Activity Alliance, 2020](#)). 
- **25% of disabled children take part in PE & sport** all of the time – compared to 41% for non-disabled children ([Activity Alliance, 2020](#)).

2. Whole school culture and context

[The Governance Handbook for SEND and Inclusion](#) (Boddison, 2020) refers to the concept of ‘Think SEND!’ and emphasises the responsibility that every governor/trustee and every staff member has to look through the lens of SEND in their role.

In his book *Addressing Disadvantage in Schools and Colleges: The Essex Way*, Marc Rowland talks about the importance of a consistent, collective understanding of inclusion and placing “inclusion at the heart of decision making and thinking”:



Questions to explore:

- How well does the governing board scrutinise data on pupils with SEND, looking beyond attainment and progress to metrics such as attendance, behaviour, exclusions and participation?
- Are classrooms and the curriculum adapted to meet the needs of all pupils, including those with SEND?
- How do leaders check that all staff have high aspirations for pupils with SEND?
- Is the governing board aware of the funding received to meet the needs of pupils with SEND (e.g., the notional SEND budget and top-up funding), and how is value for money ensured?
- How often do pupils leave the SEND register, and how is this data used to inform improvements in SEND provision?
- Does the school’s extra-curricular offer, including school sport, enable pupils with SEND to participate meaningfully and be inspired? Does the board monitor this?

Whole School SEND has [a handbook to embedding inclusive practice in schools](#).

3. Governing board responsibilities

Governing boards are responsible for ensuring that school/trust systems and processes do not pose barriers to pupils with SEND. This provides a foundation upon which wider school practice is built on.

While having an advocate or link for SEND on your board emphasises its importance, SEND remains the responsibility of the whole board.

SEND, as with all areas of disadvantage, should be central to decision making and overall strategic direction.

Relevant resources and reading

- The Accessibility Plan for your school(s) – All schools must have an Accessibility Plan. This is a multi-year plan to remove barriers for those with SEND. It is important that boards scrutinise their school’s plan and hold leaders to account over progress towards the targets.
- The SEN Information Report (SIR) for your school(s) – All schools must have a SIR. The [SEND Code of Practice](#) outlines what it must include and reminds schools that it should be written in **straightforward** language (p.106-107).

NGA’s resources support governors and trustees to understand their duties relating to SEND:

- [SEND governance monitoring and evaluation tool](#)
- [SEND link governor/trustee role description](#)
- [Governing board SEND responsibilities checklist](#)
- NGA Learning Link subscribers can access [e-learning on the governance of SEND](#).
- [SEND Governors: Five great tips for working with SENCOs](#) – practical advice on the ‘nuts and bolts’ of being a SEND governor.
- Whole school SEND has [a range of free online resources](#) including a [Governing board SEND self-assessment](#).
- [Square Pegs: Inclusivity, compassion and fitting in: A guide for schools](#) – A book that is especially helpful for SEND governors who want to widen their understanding.
- [The Governance Handbook for SEND and Inclusion](#) – a guide to governance of SEND in schools.

4. Staff responsibilities

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has produced a [guidance report](#) to help mainstream schools provide an inclusive environment for pupils with SEND. The guidance challenges the idea that responsibility for special educational needs is solely the job of the SENCo:

“The SENCo has an important role in the development of a school’s approach, but ensuring all pupils achieve—including those with SEND—is everyone’s responsibility. If the SENCo takes sole responsibility, there is a risk of deskilling school leaders and classroom teachers who can subsequently lose confidence in supporting pupils with SEND.”

Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools, EEF

Recommendations within the EEF guidance include:

- create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils, without exception
- build an ongoing, holistic understanding of your pupils and their needs
- ensure all pupils have access to high quality teaching
- complement high quality teaching with carefully selected interventions
- work effectively with teaching assistants

Questions to explore:

- How are staff, at all levels, supported to meet the needs of pupils with SEND?
- Are staff trained on strategies to prevent or de-escalate dysregulated behaviour presented by some SEND pupils? Is the training effective?
- Are teaching assistant roles having a positive impact on pupils with SEND?
- How does the school build a holistic picture of learning needs for pupils with SEND?

5. Parental engagement

Parental engagement is one of the most important aspects of supporting children with SEND. Parents and carers will be the experts when it comes to their child, as well as a key to unlock even better progress for each child.

Questions to explore:

- How does the school seek and understand the views of parents, carers, and families in relation to SEND, including the impact on the whole family?
- How well do school leaders convey the school's inclusive ethos to parents, including prospective families of pupils with SEND? How is a warm welcome extended to these families?
- How is the school involving parents and carers in agreeing strategies to support pupils' learning, mental health and overall wellbeing?
- How effectively does the school provide parents with practical strategies to support learning and wider development at home?
- How is the school critically reviewing its engagement with parents and carers, and what steps are being taken to improve collaboration and communication?
- How is the school using evidence-based guidance, such as the EEF's parental engagement framework, to strengthen its work with parents and carers of pupils with SEND?

Based on international evidence, EEF has published [advice on engaging with parents](#).