

Twining

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A quarter way through the 21st century, we stand at a crossroads in English education with regard to children with special educational needs.

The Warnock Report of 1978 and the Education Act of 1981 marked vital step-changes in our schooling system. Thereafter, children and young people with special educational needs could have their proper access to classroom learning, with appropriate support.

Yet take these statistics from one of the largest local authorities in the country: in 2016 the county was responsible for 7,550 children with an Education, Health & Care Plan. In January 2024 the number increased to 13,228. The same county has seen an irresistible rise in the number of EHCPs, an increase of 28 per cent since March 2021.

And put these arresting national figures for 2022/23 into the mix: 790,000 suspensions and 9,400 exclusions; of the exclusions, more than half were pupils with special educational needs who make up just 17% of the total school population.

It is this collective and palpable demand across the country - and its unaffordable costs - which places our education system at a critical crossroads.

There is no financial cavalry on the horizon if you read the recent budget figures carefully. School and trust leaders are going to have to find positive solutions to meeting the needs of the vast majority of children *within* mainstream schools. The nation's special schools are in good heart, but there is simply not the capacity within them to address what we see as burgeoning numbers of youngsters who have identified special needs.

My UK travels last academic year took me into 50+ primary, special and secondary schools in England. What is striking in the most successfully inclusive mainstream settings is how leaders skilfully weigh the therapeutic needs of a small minority of learners alongside the academic and social demands of the majority of pupils. Day-to-day organisation ensures time is well used by all.

I think of a primary school of 400 children in a northern city where the sensory resource base for ten children enabled both them and their 390 peers to make excellent progress all day. And in a secondary in the West Midlands where the creativity and precision of expectations operating in the inclusion spaces led to similarly calm and purposeful learning for the 1200 students. In both schools, attendance was around the 94% mark.

Reflecting on what some of the most effective national, regional and local trusts are doing, one thinks especially of the way in which on-site special resource bases have been established within primary and secondary campuses across their networks.

One further solution lies with 'twinning'.

Mainstream schools are 'twinning' informally with neighbouring and neighbourly special schools, in some cases linking independent and state provision.

What are the gains from this twinning?

1. Teachers in special and mainstream are learning from one another, daily and weekly, about resources, teaching styles, pastoral care, behaviour management.
2. Teachers in special schools, too often operating in isolation, are feeling valued by the professional advice they can provide - and in turn have increased opportunities to learn about best practices, for example in relation to GCSE teaching and assessment.
3. Support staff in classrooms and inclusion spaces are raising their expectations of what pupils *can* achieve when skilfully managed in climates of top expectations.

The schools' system is at a crossroads in SEND provision. To ignore the potential of such twinning nationally would smack of professional neglect. In the coming year we shall see pioneers in this space. Leaders will attract fast-increasing numbers of followers.

With acknowledgement, a version of this article first appeared in Schools Week.

Roy Blatchford's latest book is ['The A - Z of Great Classrooms'](#), published by John Catt