

## Special Educational Needs: a false dawn or radical next steps?

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September 2025

The autumn term looks set to deliver three significant playbooks for schools: a new inspection toolkit; a curriculum review; and proposals for reshaping SEND. The third requires parliamentary involvement: backbench interventions will decide a false dawn or radical change in this arena.

Before the DfE sets out its SEND proposals, a working group for think-tank IPPR\* is intent on shaping national thinking, and reporting soonest:

*To review and improve how children and young people with SEND are supported across England. The IPPR Inclusion Taskforce will set out a positive vision with proposals for how the system can be reformed.*

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We all have our own stories around special educational needs which have determined our thinking. A formative five for me include:

1. A close family member, born with spina bifida, who spent her first five years in Great Ormond Street hospital; then her school career in mainstream schools, before training to be a nurse then a GP.
2. As a sixth-form student, acting as an examination amanuensis to boys attending Worcester College for the Blind.
3. Starting my secondary teaching career in a south London comprehensive with a superb unit for partially hearing children.
4. As a pastoral head of 315 children in an ILEA comprehensive in the 1980s: there was no special needs department and no child had a statement of special needs (Mary Warnock published her landmark report in 1978).
5. Visits as HMI, inspector and reviewer to hundreds of mainstream and special schools across this country and internationally, each practising model provision and inclusion.

What then are my 'pre-conceptions' about special needs provision which inform the **seven proposals** below?

- that the support and love of family and friends is the most important ingredient of a successful education
- that some children and young people need top quality educational and medical support, in bespoke settings, to achieve what they are capable of
- that most children can thrive in well resourced mainstream schools, each child with their unique needs identified accurately, addressed precisely, and reviewed regularly
- that pupils learn and are best taught *without labels*.

## **Seven proposals**

1. The national funding formula needs fundamental change to eradicate the 'funding apartheid' which leads to differences of up to £3,000 per pupil in the nation's schools. Change this - and you change much of the argument about proper investment in special needs.
2. The 'medicalisation' of mild learning difficulties and diagnosis inflation accelerated post-Covid without a doubt. There has to be a cross-profession determination to reaffirm, especially with parents, a culture of successful learning without labels.
3. The local school is where families send their children: every school has a climate and approach which welcomes all children. Primary and secondary schools to have a staffing complement (including qualified SENDCo) which can meet the needs of the vast majority of local children.
4. Parents have the right to send their child - particularly if requiring a 'memorandum of identified needs' - to the local school, but no other school. Education Health Care Plans as we know them will be phased out.
5. All children with special needs will be educated within local authorities or within charity-led settings. There will be no travel funded beyond the nearest school that the LA determines can meet need.
6. The state will not fund any special needs provision at independent schools run for profit. The NHS remains for all of us the lifelong 'health bank' of last resort.

7. The best academy trusts and individual schools have well established on-site resource bases to cater for most educational needs: this model should be built on with intent. And every special school should be 'formally twinned' with a mainstream school so that accomplished learning and teaching practices are generously shared.

*IPPR please note:*

Make just seven fine recommendations, and you might get some traction. Make a dozen, and they'll sink!

It was Sir Winston Churchill who declared to his fellow MPs, with precious little confidence in them, that if you make two points in a maiden speech in parliament 'the buggers will forget the first'.

\* <https://www.ippr.org/articles/ippr-inclusion-taskforce>

**Roy Blatchford's latest book is [The A – Z of Good Governance](#).**