

GUEST COLUMN - November 2021

Leading great SEND provision in schools David Bartram OBE

We appear to be making the leadership of SEND increasingly complicated. The danger of creating this overly complex approach is that it persuades teachers across the country that they may not be sufficiently expert enough to help children experiencing difficulty.

It also undermines the confidence of headteachers in mainstream schools to drive through change in order to improve outcomes for this significant group of learners. The net result is isolation of SENCOs and the maintenance of a school-wide view that marginalised learners are somebody else's 'problem'.

School leadership is a catalyst for improving learner outcomes and this is clearly recognised in the field of SEND. Steve Radcliffe, in his book *Leadership: plain and simple* (2012), recognises the importance of leaders owning their own agenda and argues that leadership is about doing three key things well, an approach which he summarises as Future-Engage-Deliver or FED.

When it comes to leading SEND in schools, the more we keep things simple, the better.

Future

In this FED model, the first key area focuses on the future - your vision for your provision and what you want all staff to achieve together for your learners. The overall strategy should be based on what the research and evidence about great SEND provision tells you is most effective, so long as it is applied to your context.

When it comes to leading for SEND, taking some time out to really think about what your job entails will usually pay huge dividends. It is easy to get sucked into reacting to events, external accountabilities and individual learner needs. While these are all clearly important, finding ways to step back and see your bigger strategic picture as well as the need to build engagement with all staff across the school is your secret to even greater success.

Key themes to support your vision:

- Leaders and governors work together, using evidence, to establish a clear vision, ethos and strategic intent for learners with SEND at the school.
- SEND has a high profile in the school. There is a culture of high aspiration for all learners.

Engage

Once you are clear on your vision for the future and your strategy for achieving your goals, the next key area of work is to build and sustain great relationships with all those stakeholders, including your teachers, outside agencies, learners and parents who are going to make it happen.

For example, embedding parental involvement is based on extensive but often ignored evidence that greater parental involvement has a dramatic impact on progression, attainment and wider outcomes as well as improved attendance and behaviour. This is especially relevant for children and young people with SEND who are already vulnerable learners. Parental engagement needs to be part of a whole-school approach and there should be clear leadership of parental engagement within the school.

High quality teaching is the foundation for progress for all learners. It is believed that the difference between poor teaching and highly effective teaching equates to just under half a year's extra progress for most learners. The effects of high-quality teaching are especially significant for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds: over a school year, these learners gain one and a half years' worth of learning with very effective teachers, compared with half a year's worth with poorly performing teachers.

Key themes to support your engagement:

- Leaders with responsibility for SEND are involved in reviewing and helping teachers improve the quality of teaching for all learners.
- The school has created a culture and ethos that welcomes and engages parents and carers of learners with SEND.

Deliver

The third stage in this model is focused on making sure you deliver. Leadership is about making sure things happen when you want them to and to the standard you expect.

This means having the right systems and processes in place. For example, rigorous monitoring and tracking helps to inform strategic decisions regarding interventions and classroom practice. Systems that support this process, such as the use of a provision map, will help in planning the range of provision across the school and can give a clear link between provision and learner progress.

Appropriate intervention cannot be put in place if a learner's needs have not been correctly identified. It is important to take the time to reflect on a school's range of current screening and assessment tools, and where necessary to engage with the relevant professionals to ensure precise identification. Schools sometimes use interventions based on their current or historic offer, or based on areas of staff expertise, rather than drilling down into the individual needs of the learner and then personalising the intervention around them.

Key themes to support your delivery:

- High quality assessment and identification lead to teachers being better informed about learner need and, in turn, improving outcomes for learners with SEND.
- The school rigorously evaluates interventions and classroom practice for learners with SEND. Adjustments to the provision are made accordingly.

Excellent practice in SEND will remain a distant hope unless we empower all our leaders to realise that teaching learners with SEND is not some form of alchemy. Leading great SEND provision in school is actually about great leadership. So, don't be concerned if you haven't ticked all the boxes on the latest SEND leadership framework – concentrate on doing a few things really well.

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