

# Trends in Education

*What recent research tells us about the key trends and issues in education in the last quarter, with a focus on SEND and inclusion.*

SEND continues to be one of the most contentious and challenging aspects of the education system, with far-reaching implications for education standards, school attendance, education access and pupils' life chances.

This article looks at some of the recent issues surrounding SEND education in the UK and how they might be addressed by policymakers and educationalists.

## Funding

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) brought the future of SEND funding into sharp focus in a report on school budgets, published in January<sup>1</sup>. The report predicts that a rapid rise in the cost of SEND provision will wipe out any opportunities for savings promised by the recently announced 2.8% rise in overall per-pupil funding.

A separate IFS study last December warned that councils risked going into 'absurd' deficits, totalling £8 billion by 2027, unless the expansion of SEND in mainstream schools was properly funded in the short term<sup>2</sup>. Though it said a well-resourced and more equitable SEND system could be possible in the long term, the study urged that 'the short run was likely to pose major challenges' financially.

The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) recently set out a five-point plan for the reform of SEND education, claiming that 'a decade of missed opportunities' had left the system 'in crisis'<sup>3</sup>. Its proposals include diverting more money to early identification and intervention, and better financial coordination between education, public health and care partners.

CIPFA said its plans, set out in its report 'Reforming SEND finance: meeting need in a sustainable system', would 'tackle the financial instability that has driven many local authorities to a financial cliff-edge'. As if to

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highlight the point, the Local Government Association reported in February 2025 that more than half of councils supporting SEND children will fall into deficit next year when changes to accounting measures come into force<sup>4</sup>.

## Policy and practice

The Education Policy Institute (EPI) highlighted inequalities and 'blind spots' in provision in a study on the identification of SEND in February<sup>5</sup>. Its findings highlighted several inconsistencies and challenges across the country which make it difficult to identify children with SEND and result in some pupils lacking the support they need.

The report noted, for example, that pupils attending academies are less likely to be identified as having SEND than their peers in other schools, and that girls are less likely to be diagnosed with an emotional or mental health need than boys. The report also called for persistent school absentees to be assessed for SEND.

The government has created two new advisory groups to guide SEND education<sup>6</sup>, for which SEND identification will be a key focus. The expert advisory group on inclusion will look at how to improve mainstream education outcomes for children with SEND, while the Neurodivergence Task and Finish Group will advise the government on how to improve inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools.

<sup>1</sup> <https://ifs.org.uk/news/schools-and-colleges-facing-another-round-belt-tightening-years-spending-review>

<sup>2</sup> <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/spending-special-educational-needs-england-something-has-change>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/latest-press-releases/five-key-reforms-to-fix-englands-broken-send-system>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/half-councils-warn-insolvency-over-special-needs-spending>

<sup>5</sup> <https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/SEND-Final-Report-version-FINAL-04.02.2024-2.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/dfe-names-19-expert-advisers-on-inclusion-in-schools-send>

In December, the all-party Commons Education Select Committee launched an inquiry into how to solve the crisis in SEND, spanning from early years to the age of 25<sup>7</sup>. Options considered were multi-agency approaches, funding reforms and improved training and support for educators.

Helen Hayes MP, the committee chair, said: 'We want to move beyond simply pointing out the problems and focus on finding solutions that are realistic and practical for the government to implement. As a country we can't continue with this endless cycle of failure. Turning this ship around will likely take years of careful reform.'

In its submission to the inquiry, the British Educational Suppliers Association (BESA) outlined a number of considerations for the committee. The committee's report is expected to be published later this year.

## Ofsted and wellbeing

The EPI argued that pupil wellbeing should be a category featured on Ofsted's new report cards, to give parents a more nuanced understanding of a school's effectiveness<sup>8</sup>. In a report about the future of school accountability, the think tank called for a 'fairer and more holistic approach' to measuring schools, which would include children's mental health and wellbeing. There are currently no such measures available in government data or as part of the inspection process.

The call came as the schools' watchdog was planning to replace single-phrase judgements with a new report card system and framework<sup>9</sup>. The EPI cited an annual pupil wellbeing survey called #BeeWell, used in parts of the North West and South of England as an example of how this could work.

The EPI's report pointed out that existing criteria did not encourage schools to be inclusive. It said: 'Current performance measures can provide a disincentive to schools being inclusive for all pupils. Inflexible systems that do not recognise and adjust for the high level of additional needs amongst some pupils are incompatible with an education system that works for all.' The EPI has also updated its online tool allowing councils and academy trusts to be compared on measures such as inclusion, admissions, exclusions and attainment of disadvantaged pupils<sup>10</sup>.

Meanwhile, Margaret Mulholland, special educational needs and inclusion specialist at the Association

of School and College Leaders (ASCL) said Ofsted reforms, though disappointing in places, had the potential to improve inclusivity. In a recent article, she highlighted the school inspection toolkit, which is out for consultation, as an approach that supports early identification of SEND and fosters collaboration between schools and families to support children's learning<sup>11</sup>.

## Food for thought

These recent findings paint a clear picture of the diversity of our student population as well as the degree to which children and young people, their families, their schools and their local authorities need support in identifying and overcoming barriers to learning.

The scale of the challenge is large, but there are experts across the industry working to benefit pupils with SEND through innovative solutions. One theme that comes through from the articles in this issue of Education Insights is that improved inclusion in education can support many different aspects of an individual's wellbeing and their long term outcomes; rarely and accurate identification of needs is also crucial to providing the best possible support.

### Further reading

1. 'Annual report on education spending in England: 2024–25', The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), January 2025.
2. 'Spending on special educational needs in England: something has to change', IFS, December 2024.
3. 'Reforming SEND finance: meeting need in a sustainable system', Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), February 2025.
4. 'Identifying SEND: Final Report on Special Educational Needs & Disabilities and contact with CAMHS', The Education Policy Institute (EPI), February 2025.
5. 'Reforming accountability', EPI, January 2025.
6. 'School Inspection Toolkit', draft for consultation, UK Government.
7. 'ADCS Safeguarding Pressures Research – Phase 9', Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), January 2025.
8. 'Who is Losing Learning?', Institute for Public Policy Research and The Difference, March 2025.

<sup>7</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/204487/solving-the-send-crisis-education-committee-launches-major-inquiry/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/reforming-accountability/>

<sup>9</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67927f1ebcd53eb4d9fad612/school\\_inspection\\_toolkit\\_draft\\_for\\_consultation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67927f1ebcd53eb4d9fad612/school_inspection_toolkit_draft_for_consultation.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <https://edu-policy-inst.shinyapps.io/effective-school-groups-app-v2/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.tes.com/magazine/teaching-learning/specialist-sector/how-ofsted-plans-could-help-school-inclusion>