

SENCO to SENCO: Sharing practice you're proud of

NFER recently spoke with 28 special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs), from secondary schools* in multi-academy trusts (MATs) that had been identified as demonstrating promising practice around supporting pupils with special educational needs (SEND).

One of the key findings was that being a SENCO can be an isolating role and they really value the opportunity to learn what other schools and SENCOs are doing. As a result, we have drawn out some examples of the ways in which these SENCOs reported responding to the needs of pupils with SEND and the staff working to support them. This knowledge sharing shows the range of practices SENCOs reported that they are proud of and aims to offer you the opportunity to connect these, and your own reflections, to the work that you do.

SENCOs will want to consider their own circumstances in evaluating these suggestions, as there is no conclusive evidence to support the efficacy of these approaches, and what works for one school or MAT may not work for another.

* 27 of the 28 SENCOs interviewed worked in secondary schools.





How does SEND sit alongside other areas of inclusion within these schools?

SENCOs emphasised the importance of addressing SEND needs whilst taking into account the broader facets of inclusion, to provide an integrated response rather than working in silos.

In most cases this integration involved pastoral, SEND, safeguarding and behaviour teams working closely together, for example, working closely with behaviour leads to unpick what was going on for a child beneath the surface. This included 'inclusion panels' with representatives from each team to address teacher concerns about pupils and to discuss priority cases. This approach streamlined the referral process by preventing duplication of effort and referral to the wrong team. It was also seen to promote wider accountability.

In other cases, a single inclusion team was responsible for all aspects of inclusion.

It was seen as important for all these parties to regularly communicate, to explicitly share a clear vision and for everyone to understand how their role fitted into the system. Storing of information relating to these areas within a single place was also seen to support integrated working.

What other responsibilities were these SENCOs taking on?



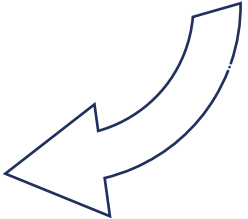
How and when does communication occur between different inclusion teams within my school?

Is there any way in which we could make our referral process more integrated and efficient?



How do schools adapt the curriculum for pupils with SEND?

Some schools emphasised the importance of providing the same curriculum for all pupils. However, while the content was expected to be the same, a range of supports and considerations were still applied, including:



modelling
environment
multimedia resources
visual representations
subtitles
teacher body language
accessible language
sensory breaks
signer
assistive technology
seating arrangements
contextualised language
scaffolding
timeout passes
chunking
colour coding

SENCOs also reported working with curriculum leaders to make subject-specific adaptations to schemes of work and to ensure consistency in levels of differentiation and scaffolding across the curriculum.

Some schools offered slight deviations from the main curriculum, such as study skills as a ninth GCSE subject where pupils took eight, or free life skills instead of particular subjects (e.g. geography, foreign languages). These SENCOs saw this as important for helping young people with SEND to function independently and live as part of the community. Additional outdoor enrichment activities were also offered.

Other schools offered differentiated pathways according to levels and type of pupil need. For example, pupils with severe cognition and learning needs were provided with an alternative curriculum that was broad and balanced but incorporated more experiential and multi-sensory approaches and with smaller class sizes.

Pupils with more SEMH-related needs could, on the other hand, access a kind of internal Alternative Provision (AP) with the same curriculum but with greater wrap-around support, staffing consistency and a separate dedicated learning space. In these cases, the schools emphasised the importance of all pupils still feeling part of the community and having the flexibility to access mainstream lessons where appropriate.



What kinds of interventions are schools using?

SENCOs reported delivering interventions across a wide range of areas, including:



dexterity
 social skills
 homework support
 resilience
 fine motor skills
 sensory
 confidence
 numeracy
 bereavement
 emotional literacy
 nurture groups
 self-esteem
 literacy
 anxiety
 sensory
 phonics
 anger management
 sleep hygiene
 managing emotions
 friendships
 transition



Some SENCOs avoided taking pupils out of class to receive interventions, relying instead of slots before and after school as well as during break times. These SENCOs felt that it was important for these pupils to be working with their teachers as much as possible and not missing out on any class content. It also meant TAs were available to support in classrooms rather than delivering interventions.

Registration and tutor time was another option used by some schools.

Evidence-based interventions were prioritised. Peer learning and one-to-one tuition in core subjects were also offered.

Are pupils with SEND missing out on any parts of the curriculum they would benefit from? Is there anything outside the curriculum that they could benefit from more?

Do pupils with SEND experience consistent levels of support across all areas of our curriculum?

What interventions are available for our pupils? Are they evidence-based? Are there any gaps?





Are there ways in which my school could deploy TA time more effectively and/or efficiently?

Would my pupils benefit more from intensive one-to-one support or a strong holistic team?

How do these schools deploy TAs to support pupils with SEND?

SENCOs reported a hugely diverse range of ways in which TA support was deployed in their school:

- TAs trained to be specialists in specific aspects of SEND, to upskill them and give them ownership over that area.
- Attaching TAs to specific year groups so they can build relationships with the same pupil cohort over the course of their school years.
- TAs moving between classrooms over the course of a lesson to check on pupils and keep them on task without risk of creating a sense of dependence.
- In-class TA support for pupils with EHCPs in core subjects.
- Using EHCP funding to build a large holistic team to support all EHCP pupils rather than focusing it on provision for individual pupils.
- In-class TA but no one-to-one support unless physical disability requires it.
- Each TA is a dedicated mentor for a group of children with SEND, providing regular mentoring, pastoral support, and parental contact, and advocating for their needs.

What kinds of measures did these schools report using for looking at SEND outcomes?

Academic: progress 8, age-standardised scores

Attendance

Post-16 destinations

Emotional & well-being measures

Teacher feedback

Detention

Extracurricular participation

Most SENCOs reported a school focus on academic outcomes, although many noted that in reality what 'good outcomes' look like is different for every pupil with SEND and is nuanced in a way that is difficult to capture with any concrete measure.

'Academic progress is important but good progress is not always academic and good progress for me is giving pupils life changes, life skills [...] preparing them for adulthood [...] the opportunity for life similar to their peers.'

- SENCO of a large secondary school

What do 'good outcomes' for SEND pupils mean to me? How are they measured within my school?

Are there ways in which these outcomes could be considered more holistically?





What kind of spaces do these schools provide for pupils who might find the school environment overwhelming?

For pupils who were unable to be in the classroom whether for their own or others' wellbeing and safety, SENCOs reported providing sensory rooms, calm spaces to support reflection and emotional regulation, and/or areas for independent work.

In some cases, these were part of a 'hub' that also offered intervention, teaching, therapy and/or social spaces. In nearly all cases these alternative spaces offered a more pastoral focused setting and consistent staffing to help the pupils feel safe and encourage relationship-building over time.

It was also seen as important for these spaces to be located within the main school building so the pupils did not feel excluded from the school community. Usually these spaces were for short-term use only. Some schools offered specific pupils passes to be able to leave the classroom if they felt overwhelmed, dysregulated or needed a movement break.

Some schools, however, did not offer spaces like this as they felt it was important for pupils to remain in the classroom.



Does my school facilitate learning opportunities for pupils who may (currently) be overwhelmed by mainstream schooling all day every day?

Does my school provide spaces where pupils can feel safe – both in terms of the environment and the people present?

Are there calm areas available for pupils who may become dysregulated through over-stimulation at break times?

Is our behaviour system curious about the reasons driving the behaviour observed?

How do these schools manage difficult behaviour among vulnerable pupils, including (but not exclusively) pupils with SEND?

Designated space and bespoke programmes:

- short-term, internal AP placements to support with reintegration into the school community
- interventions and work focusing on the school's behaviour system
- investigating any potential SEND
- one-to-one English, maths and literacy interventions
- anger management work

Adaptations to behaviour policies for pupils with SEND:

- Sanction determined by whether behaviour was calculated or impulse-driven (in response to a need)
- Reduced detentions and SEND team support
- Investigating whether any SEND lies behind the behaviour observed



What are these schools doing for pupils who are struggling with school attendance for reasons relating to SEMH?

Many SENCOs reported a space near the front of the school designed to help pupils struggling with attendance to gradually build up the confidence to enable them to integrate back into the mainstream community. These spaces also offer these pupils an opportunity to continue their learning in a space where they feel safe.

Some of these spaces offered more formal support such as cognitive behavioural therapy, emotional literacy support and mental health first aiders. Separate entrances were sometimes employed to allow pupils different start and end times.

In other cases, SENCOs reported doing regular morning check-ins with pupils struggling with attendance to help them reflect on what is going well and what they are looking forward to and showing them there is someone who is listening and cares. Quiet spaces at break time were also used to support pupils who may feel overwhelmed by the social side of school.

For more information:

Read the full NFER report **The MAT Factor: Exploring how multi-academy trusts are supporting pupils with SEND**

Sign up to the NFER Classroom Round Up to be the first to receive new Research Bites nfer.ac.uk/round-up

Stay up to date with news from NFER Classroom:

Sign up to our newsletter nfer.ac.uk/round-up

Follow us on X and Instagram [@NFERClassroom](https://www.instagram.com/NFERClassroom)

For more NFER Classroom Research Bites nfer.ac.uk/research-bites

Contribute to our research:

Join our Teacher Voice Survey Panel nfer.ac.uk/jointeachervoice

Participate in current research nfer.ac.uk/participate

What is NFER Classroom:

NFER Classroom is our dedicated community for teachers and school leaders, created so we can ensure you gain true value from your engagements with us. Under the Classroom banner, you'll find our trusted education resources and guidance, developed by our in-house experts in collaboration with teachers.

Through NFER Classroom, we also provide easily accessible insights and practical learning from our NFER research, to support you in your practice and thank you for your vital contribution to our wider work.

nfer.ac.uk/classroom