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Best Practice

It's not just a SEND project: Getting started with inclusion reforms

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One of the biggest risks of SEND reform is that schools see it as a SEND project, says school leader Clare Lunnon Haines. Instead, the reforms are an invitation to rethink what it means for children to thrive...



'One of the biggest mistakes schools could make over the next few years is rushing to create new provision before fully understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their existing system' - *Adobe Stock*
Over the past few months, I have found myself in a growing number of conversations with school leaders about the SEND reforms as detailed in the [Schools White Paper](#). Most begin in a similar way.

Leaders want to know what practical changes they need to make, whether they need new provision, and how they should prepare for the next phase of the reforms.

These are understandable questions. However, I increasingly believe that they are the wrong starting point.

One of the biggest risks of SEND reform is that schools see it as a SEND project. The more I have engaged with the [emerging guidance](#), the more convinced I have become that it is something much bigger than that.

At its heart, this feels less like a SEND initiative and more like a school improvement opportunity. It is an invitation to rethink what it means for children to thrive.

The trap

As the reforms gathered pace, it felt as though new DfE guidance was arriving almost weekly. Throughout the summer there was a steady stream of consultation responses, implementation papers, reform updates, inclusion guidance, enrichment guidance, and now training materials. As with many school leaders, my first instinct was to focus on the practical implications.

I began by looking at provision maps, interventions, referral pathways, staffing structures, EHCP numbers, inclusion bases, and funding arrangements. All these things matter, and all have an important place within the wider conversation.

However, the more I read, the more I noticed a different set of themes appearing repeatedly across the reform agenda. The language increasingly focused not on provision, diagnosis or statutory processes, but on belonging, participation, independence and opportunity.

The more I read, the more it felt as though these documents were not describing separate initiatives or priorities. They were all pointing towards the same destination.

These themes appear throughout the SEND reforms themselves, the plans for new National Inclusion Standards, the [DfE's research with parents](#) about the Inclusion Base policy, the [Inclusion Base guidance](#), and the [Enrichment Framework](#). Although the language varies, the underlying message feels remarkably consistent.

Taken together, they suggest a future system in which belonging, participation and opportunity are valued alongside attainment rather than treated as separate concerns. Success is not simply about whether support exists. Success is about whether children can access learning, relationships, and opportunities within their school community.

What changed my thinking

Over the past few years, my thinking about inclusion has gradually shifted away from provision and towards children.

Not necessarily the children who attract the most attention. Some children are overlooked, while others are highly visible but still struggle because the systems around them are not yet responding effectively to their needs. That is an important conversation, and one I intend to return to in future articles.

Instead, I often find myself reflecting on the children who sit somewhere in the middle. These are the pupils who work hard, attend regularly and rarely cause concern. They complete their work, follow routines and do what is asked of them, yet somehow never seem to fulfil the potential that others can see in them.

Most schools can think of pupils like this. They are often described as quiet, lacking confidence or not yet ready. Yet when we look more closely, a different picture sometimes emerges.

Many of these children do not need lower expectations. What they often need are greater opportunities to participate, contribute and belong. That might be joining a club, taking on a leadership role, contributing to wider school life, finding a trusted adult, or simply being given the chance to use their voice.

The more I have reflected on the children who flourish in schools, the more I have noticed the same pattern. Their success rarely begins with attainment. More often, it begins with belonging.

This has led me to a conclusion that now sits at the heart of my thinking about inclusion: Before achievement comes belonging.

Before children achieve, they often need to feel that they belong.

Before they belong, they need opportunities to participate. Before they participate, they need a voice.

For many children, the journey looks less like achievement leading to confidence, and more like: Belonging – Participation – Voice – Achievement – Independence – Thriving.

If that sequence is true for children, it raises an important question for schools: How do we build systems that create those conditions consistently and at scale?

The more I reflect on the reform agenda, the more I realise that the conversation is not simply about individual children. It is also about whether our systems are designed to provide the right support at the right time, before needs escalate and before barriers become entrenched.

The missing middle

As part of our own review, we identified something that may be familiar to many schools. We had strong universal provision. We had strong

specialist provision. We had skilled and committed staff. We also had a range of established interventions.

What we lacked was a clearly defined middle layer. This is where my thinking about SEND reform began to shift from children to systems. For many years, the SEND conversation has been dominated by two ends of the spectrum. We know there are children whose needs can be met through high-quality classroom teaching, adaptive practice and targeted support. We also know there are children who require specialist provision and highly specialised expertise. The challenge sits in the middle.

Increasingly, schools are supporting a growing group of children whose needs are significant enough to require something more than ordinarily available provision, but who may not require specialist placement. These are often the children around whom the national conversation has become most complex.

As school leaders, we find ourselves in an unusual position. We are working towards a reform model that is not yet statutory, interpreting guidance that is still evolving and trying to prepare for a destination that is not yet fully defined. Yet standing still is not an option.

Few would argue that the current system is working as intended. [EHCP numbers continue to rise](#). Families often feel they must fight for support. Schools face increasing pressure to secure resources. Too often, support becomes attached to individual children rather than building capacity across the wider system.

The question is not whether children need support. Of course they do. The question is whether we can build systems that provide the right support earlier, more consistently, and for more children. That is why the concept of Targeted Plus interests me so much.

The SEND reforms begin with the universal offer. The [DfE has stated](#): "We expect most children will have their needs met through this offer." For those with additional needs, there will be three further levels of support (DfE, 2026):

- **Targeted:** Structured support such as speech and language support in small groups or help with managing sensory needs. This will be recorded in their digital Individual Support Plan, developed by schools and in partnership with parents.
- **Targeted Plus:** More specialist support from education and health professionals, including speech and language therapists and educational psychologists. This will be delivered in partnership with our Experts at Hand Offer. This will also be recorded through their Individual Support Plan.
- **Specialist:** Children with complex needs will get comprehensive, specialist support through a Specialist

Provision Package and EHCP in a mainstream or specialist setting. The detail day-to-day support they will receive will be recorded in their Individual Support Plan.

For me, Targeted and Targeted Plus is less about creating another layer of provision and more about strengthening what already sits in that middle ground.

It is about developing expertise, pathways and capacity. It is about asking how a school's resources can support five children rather than one. It is about ensuring that specialist knowledge strengthens classroom practice rather than remaining attached to an individual adult. It is about preventing escalation through earlier support, rather than simply responding once needs become entrenched.

I suspect many schools will recognise this challenge. Not because support does not exist, but because support is often delivered through a collection of pathways rather than a coherent system.

In many cases, the provision already exists. What is often missing is a shared understanding of who it is for, how pupils access it, how impact is reviewed and how it fits into a graduated response.

The challenge is not necessarily to create more provision. It is to organise existing strengths into something clearer, more consistent and easier for children, families and staff to navigate.

In other words, it is about building a stronger middle layer.

Inclusion is not SEND

Perhaps the biggest shift in my thinking has been this: Inclusion is not the responsibility of the SEND team. It is not a room. It is not a provision map. It is not a collection of interventions. Inclusion is the way a school works.

It is visible in adaptive teaching, relationships, attendance, enrichment opportunities, leadership experiences, pupil voice, family partnerships and, perhaps most importantly, the way adults talk about children.

When we begin looking through that lens, many seemingly separate agendas start to connect.

- Oracy becomes an inclusion strategy.
- Enrichment becomes an inclusion strategy.
- Attendance becomes an inclusion strategy.
- Behaviour becomes an inclusion strategy.
- And SEND becomes everybody's responsibility.

Asking better questions

One of the biggest mistakes schools could make over the next few years is rushing to create new provision before fully understanding the

strengths and weaknesses of their existing system. Too often, the first questions become:

- What intervention do we need?
- What provision should we create?
- Which pupils need support?

These questions are not unimportant, but I have come to believe there is a more useful starting point: What is getting in the way of this child belonging, participating and thriving?

That question changes the conversation. It moves us away from labels and towards barriers. It moves us away from provision and towards systems. Most importantly, it moves us away from compliance and towards impact.

A better place to start

If your school is beginning to think about SEND reform, my advice is simple. Do not start by reviewing interventions. Do not start by redesigning staffing structures. Do not start by creating an inclusion base. Instead, start by asking a different set of questions.

- Do our children feel that they belong?
- Are they participating fully in the life of the school?
- Whose voices are heard?
- Who might be missing out?
- What is getting in the way?

If we can answer those questions honestly, many of the other decisions become much clearer.

The more I have engaged with the reforms, the more convinced I have become that they are all pointing towards the same destination.

Whether we are talking about SEND Reform, the impending National Inclusion Standards, parent voice, enrichment, attendance or belonging, the underlying question remains remarkably consistent: How do we create schools where every child can belong, participate and thrive?

The reforms are an opportunity to rethink how schools create belonging, participation, voice and opportunity for all children. And that feels like a very good place to start.

- ***Clare Lunn Haines is deputy headteacher at Fielding Primary School & Nursery in Ealing, west London.***

Further information & resources

- *DfE: Guidance: Every child achieving and thriving and SEND consultation supporting information, February 2026: www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-send-reforms-sheets*

- *DfE: Schools White Paper: What parents need to know about changes to the SEND system, Education Hub Blog, May 2026: <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2026/05/schools-white-paper-what-parents-need-to-know-about-changes-to-the-send-system/>*
- *DfE: Developing an inclusion strategy using the inclusive mainstream fund, June 2026: [Click here.](#)*
- *DfE: Guidance: Inclusion bases in schools, June 2026: [Click here.](#)*
- *DfE: Guidance: Inclusive mainstream fund: Best practice for schools, August 2026: www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-mainstream-fund-support-for-school-leaders/inclusive-mainstream-fund-best-practice-for-schools*