

## SEND reform: putting children and young people first

### Education Endowment Foundation Response, May 2026

#### About the Education Endowment Foundation

1. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an independent charity dedicated to breaking the link between family income and educational achievement. Our mission is to support the education sector to transform outcomes for socio-economically disadvantaged children and young people from age 2 to 19. We do so by enabling early years settings, schools, and colleges to focus on delivering high-quality education, based on evidence and what works best in practice.
2. We hold a unique position in the English education system, with three key roles:
  - **We summarise evidence.** We synthesise the global evidence base to find out what is already known about improving teaching and learning.
  - **We build evidence.** We develop, evaluate, and scale up programmes and approaches that aim to boost outcomes for children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
  - **We put evidence to use.** We help policy makers, leaders and educators to use evidence to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
3. As of 2024, by the end of secondary school, an attainment gap of 19.1 months has emerged between pupils facing disadvantage and their peers. This is down slightly from 2023 (19.2 months) but considerably wider than pre-pandemic years (e.g., 18.1 months in 2019) (EPI, 2025A). Research by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) has found that a higher level of Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) amongst pupils facing disadvantage has made a key contribution to this disadvantage attainment gap (EPI, 2025B).
4. EEF has produced a range of resources that seek to support leaders, educators and policymakers to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND, including:
  - **Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools guidance report**, which provides schools seeking to improve their provision for pupils with SEND with recommendations based on a focused review of the best available evidence on improving outcomes for pupils with SEND in mainstream.
  - **SEND ‘five-a-day’ resource and tools**, which outline five approaches that teachers should consider adopting for pupils with SEND. Whilst likely to support all pupils, evidence suggests these approaches can particularly benefit pupils with SEND.
  - **Tool to support schools with selecting interventions for pupils with SEND**, which provides schools with five principles to support the success of their intervention offer.

#### Evidence-informed approach to supporting SEND

##### Corresponding questions:

Q2. How can we make sure that high-quality evidence and best practice inform decisions about SEND? Please share examples.

Q3. How can we ensure that children are best supported by the Universal offer?

Q4. How can we ensure that children in the Targeted layer, are best supported?

- Q5. How can we ensure that children in the Targeted Plus layer, are best supported?
- Q6. How can we ensure that children in the Specialist layer are best supported?
- Q8. Do you agree that the refreshed ‘areas of development’ will support educators to understand and address barriers to learning and participation? Please explain your answer.
- Q11. What should the top three priority areas be for building and sharing evidence within the National Inclusion Standards?
- Q12. What are the most important issues for national training to cover, to help support children and young people with SEND?
- Q19. How can we make sure that Inclusion Bases help children and young people succeed in mainstream settings?
- Q30. How should settings be held accountable for how they spend their Inclusive Mainstream funding?

5. **While there is some evidence on ‘what works’ for pupils with SEND, significant gaps remain.** The Centre for Educational Neuroscience’s ‘MetaSENse’ project conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of over 400 international studies looking at how well targeted teaching approaches helped pupils with SEND and their effects on reading, writing, mathematics, science and general attainment outcomes for pupils with any type of SEND (Van Herwegen et al, 2024). A toolkit was co-produced with educators that summarised the findings (Centre for Educational Neuroscience, n.d.). However, the project highlighted significant gaps in the evidence base, including the lack of studies from the UK and from secondary school contexts, as well as a need for more research targeting students with physical disabilities, sensory needs and intellectual disabilities (Van Herwegen et al, 2024, p. 9).
6. **The lack of robust, relevant evidence means it is crucial that we continue to build the evidence base through ongoing evaluation.** The DfE’s ambition to ensure that high quality evidence informs educators’ decisions in relation to SEND is important. However, at present the gaps in the current evidence base mean that there are areas where this is likely to be challenging given the many practices for which high quality evidence does not yet exist. For example, it will be challenging for schools to use evidence when selecting targeted interventions to support SEND learners, given many of these have not been robustly evaluated. Overall, more research is needed, in particular to support teachers to understand which adaptations are likely to be effective to respond to particular student needs.
7. **There is also a practice gap between what we do know is effective, and some interventions used in schools and settings.** The MetaSENse project included in-depth interviews to identify what practices were being implemented in schools, finding a gap between approaches interviewees reported using and those that have been evaluated in literature (Van Herwegen et al, 2024, p. 11). It therefore remains important that teachers are supported to engage with research evidence as it emerges. The EEF’s resources on using research evidence may support this (e.g., EEF, 2024).
8. **There are some common components to effective practice which should be reflected in the new National Inclusion Standards, such as explicit teaching and feedback.** MetaSENse found that these two practices in particular were most likely to improve outcomes for pupils with SEND (Centre for Educational Neuroscience, n.d.). The EEF’s guidance report on Special Educational Needs in Mainstream schools (EEF, 2020) recommends that schools:
  - a) Create a positive and supportive environment for all pupils, without exception.
  - b) Build an ongoing, holistic understanding of pupils and their needs.

- c) Ensure all pupils have access to high-quality teaching.
  - d) Complement high-quality teaching with carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions.
  - e) Work effectively with teaching assistants.
9. **Many strategies to support SEND learners mirror what we know works for all pupils; in other words, getting things right for pupils with SEND is often about being even more assiduous about using strategies we know are effective for all pupils.** Searching for a ‘magic bullet’ can distract teachers from the powerful strategies they often already possess. It is important to consider how training and support for teachers and educators supports them to draw on their existing repertoire of approaches, rather than implying a need for a wholesale reinvention.
10. **Evidence suggests there may be some potential risks to a focus on ‘adaptive teaching’ at the expense of other, universal teaching strategies<sup>1</sup>.** The MetaSENse project found that across all outcomes as well as reading and writing, interventions including adaptive teaching tended to show lower effect sizes (Centre for Educational Neuroscience, n.d.). This may be linked to a requirement to make in-the-moment adaptations based on perceived pupil need without further specification of how instruction should be changed. When making adaptations to support SEND learners, it is therefore important for teachers to consider potential risks to learning, alongside potential benefits. Overall, effective SEND support relies on a combination of high-quality universal teaching, alongside support for teachers to make effective adaptations and target support.
11. **A package of professional development that is aligned to evidence will be important to support the system to implement SEND reforms effectively.** We welcome the government’s investment in a package of support (e.g., **SEND short course**). It will be critical to ensure that this is aligned with evidence where possible (see above). Additionally, it will be important to ensure that the components of this training programme fit together coherently (e.g. that there is strong alignment between training for leaders, teachers and teaching assistants) and schools and settings are supporting to consider whole-setting implementation.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a definition of adaptive teaching, see the **Initial Teacher Training and Early Career Framework (ITTECF)**.

## References

Centre for Educational Neuroscience (n.d.). MetaSENse. Centre for Educational Neuroscience. URL: <https://educationalneuroscience.org.uk/wordpress/metasense/>

Van Herwegen, J.; Dockrell, J.; Thomas, M. S. C.; Marshall, C.; Gordon, R. & Masterman, T. (2024). Raising educational outcomes for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Nuffield Foundation: August 2024. URL: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Raising-educational-outcomes-for-students-with-Special-Educational-Needs-Disabilities.pdf>

EPI (2025A). Annual Report 2025. Education Policy Institute: July 2025. URL: <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025/>

EPI (2025B). Breaking down the gap. Education Policy Institute: March 2025. URL: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/breaking-down-the-gap/>

**EEF (2020) Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools. Education Endowment Foundation: March 2020. URL: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/send>**

EEF (2024). Using research evidence – A concise guide. Education Endowment Foundation: January 2024. URL: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/more-resources-and-support/using-research-evidence>

**EEF (n.d.). Five-a-day: supporting high-quality teaching for pupils with SEND. Education Endowment Foundation. URL: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/supporting-high-quality-teaching-for-pupils-with-send>**

**EEF (n.d.). Selecting interventions for pupils with SEND. Education Endowment Foundation. URL: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/selecting-interventions>**