

SEND: What 3,000 teachers told us about how to improve things

Ask teachers what they'd raise with the education secretary if she turned up at their school, and the current issue, second only to overall funding, is SEND.

There are problems in the system from top to bottom. Despite the government spending billions more than before the pandemic, outcomes aren't improving, satisfaction seems to be plummeting, and waiting lists continue to grow.

Labour seems to agree. They've promised to announce a plan in September. But they've painted themselves into a tight corner. At the exact moment they were promising to solve SEND, their disability benefit reforms imploded under public pressure – leaving them in the unenviable position of having promised a fix, but with political ill will and no spare cash.

So what should they actually do?

We asked Teacher Tapp users in an open-ended question what they want to see in the autumn reforms. Over 3,000 teachers replied...

Give Us More Money (but for what, exactly?)

Unsurprisingly, the top demand was more funding. But most Tappers didn't say what they wanted the money spent on. In many cases it felt like a cry for someone else – anyone else – to take the load off.

In part, this aligns with lots of our data showing that, on average, teachers aren't thrilled about supporting lower-attaining or high-needs pupils. (This isn't the only form that SEND takes, but it is the most common.) Reasons include the pressure to get good results, lack of confidence (or training), and the fact that many teachers came into the profession because they love their subject—ideally taught at a high level to enthusiastic learners.

In part it also tracks because school funding has been generally reduced over the past 15 years, as have other public services. So where a school could previously access all kinds of resources to help students, they now can't. Those teachers know how much better it was when more resources existed, so of course they want them back.

BUT, when teachers were specific about what the funding should be for, here's what they said:

1. Fund the first £6k of an EHCP

Schools currently absorb the first £6,000 of any EHCP from their general budget. That's manageable for one or two pupils. But in a class of 30, if 10 students have EHCPs, the financial hit is significant. One teacher wrote: "It's bonkers that the more SEND kids you have, the more your core funding gets chipped away."

2. More teaching assistants

Primary teachers especially want more adults in the room – for behaviour, curriculum adaptation, and meltdowns. Policymakers are often cautious on this: it's expensive, the evidence on impact is mixed, and some students dislike the stigma. But if teachers are going to be expected to plan, differentiate, manage behaviour and supervise complex needs, it's understandable they want more hands to help. They aren't magical!

3. Fund smaller class sizes

EHCPs often specify maximum group sizes – "no more than 6", "no more than 10". But a teacher with ten pupils still costs the same as one with thirty. If the EHCP funding doesn't bridge that gap, it's not workable. (And that's before you get into space constraints).

4. Speed up assessments

Teachers raised concerns about both the pace and fairness of the assessments. Wealthier parents are able to go private to get diagnoses and jump the queue. Several teachers therefore suggested a stricter, more streamlined system with fewer 'go-rounds' until an assessment is agreed.

5. Fund short-term trauma interventions

Several teachers drew a distinction between stable learning disabilities and trauma-related behaviours. With mental health services backlogged—or in some cases gone entirely—they were concerned that children are being pushed towards EHCPs just to access basic therapeutic support. Teachers want short-term trauma help that doesn't require an EHCP and can be delivered by the health sector.

Beyond funding: Training, Realism, and Reform

Once funding was out of the way, teachers raised other priorities. If Labour can't offer cash, they may need to find something here instead.

6. Realistic expectations

This was the most emotionally charged theme. EHCPs make legal promises that schools sometimes physically and logistically cannot meet: they don't have the space, or the staff, or

the equipment.

Over and over again people begged for the government to give parents "a realistic understanding of what a teacher can manage in an ordinary classroom".

One way to do this would be: "Guidance for families that doesn't promise what can't be delivered."

Although not mentioned directly, answers like this felt as if there was a drive for something like the NHS Charter, created in the 1990s, which laid out patient expectations for the NHS. E.g., There IS a right not to be charged in the NHS (except in limited circumstances). There ISN'T a general right to a second opinion. That sort of thing: but for schools.

Other specific examples for improving realism included:

- Tighter diagnosis criteria, especially around behaviours like being disorganised vs ADHD.
- Public communication by politicians that not every need can be met, just as the NHS doesn't fund every treatment – and that this is a choice made to keep the system working.
- EHCPs rooted in what can be delivered in an actual school – so, not just what is 'reasonably required' but also what is 'reasonably deliverable'.
- Plans should only be written by people who understand that having one child with a need is different from having ten (or thirty).

7. More training

Teachers have told us in prior surveys that they feel underprepared to manage increasingly complex classrooms – where they must stretch and challenge every pupil while also managing a vast array of needs (including medical ones). If this needs to happen then there will need to be training programmes to go alongside it.

Alternatively, one called for national strategies to be writing by the government, like the old literacy and numeracy hours, to give clarity and consistency to SEND teaching practice. "Strategies to integrate SEND children with strong ADHD successfully... so every child can learn without disruption. Exclusion shouldn't be the go-to, but safety matters too."

8. Reforms in policy structure

Finally, some teachers suggested a broader shift in thinking about SEND which would involve:

- A shift towards prevention—including investing in early-stage interventions before children need a full SEND diagnosis, and
- More streamlined and efficient communication between families, schools, and local authorities to prevent the endless back-and-forth and also the amount of court time that can be involved. One headteacher recently wrote on social media that they spent 27% of their working hours last year involved in SEND meetings, appeals and tribunals. Labour has already hinted at some form of national complaint system, perhaps it could also cover some of this admin too?

■ Over to Labour...

What comes through most clearly in the responses is that schools are trying to make a limited system work, but they're overwhelmed, not least because other public services, from mental health to social work, have essentially collapsed. And they're also tired of being legally obligated to meet needs that government budgets won't cover and, in some cases, don't actually help the child and aren't logistically or physically possible.

Labour now faces the unenviable task of fixing this without new money and without making enemies. If they can't, SEND will stay where it is: at the top of everyone's list of problems and nobody's list of successes.