

Neurodivergent pupils in mainstream schools -

what does the research show is needed for effective provision?

England's SEND system is experiencing sustained pressure, with more neurodivergent pupils educated in mainstream schools alongside rising workforce strain, increased absence and exclusion risk, and worsening wellbeing for some pupils. Current reforms and strategies acknowledge the scale of the problem, but implementation often relies on diagnosis-led access to support and short-term measures that do not change everyday conditions in classrooms and social spaces. Evidence from schools suggests inclusion is frequently treated as an "add-on" rather than built into school design, workforce development and accountability.

This briefing synthesises evidence from four recent studies examining (1) outcomes and mechanisms of specialist resource provision in mainstream schools and (2) staff experiences, training, stress and self-efficacy in supporting neurodivergent pupils in mainstream settings. Together, these studies provide practice-facing evidence on what improves attendance, engagement and belonging, and what constrains inclusion even when policy intentions are strong.

Policy efforts to stabilise SEND will not deliver sustainable inclusion unless reforms address the conditions that enable mainstream schools to work for neurodivergent pupils. These include: strengthening school-based specialist infrastructure; shifting workforce development from one-off training to sustained, experiential learning; designing flexible curriculum access and sensory accessibility; and aligning accountability with belonging, wellbeing and life readiness alongside attainment.

Policy Context

Every child deserves the chance to thrive.

This is the vision behind the UK Government's recent white paper 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'. But for many neurodivergent pupils – this is not yet a reality.

There is growing interest in Specialist Resource Centres (SRCs) within mainstream schools as a way of combining specialist expertise with access to mainstream education. However, there remains limited evidence about how these models influence pupil outcomes, school belonging and wider inclusive practice.

Our research aims to close this gap.

Research Aims

We examined what improves outcomes for autistic pupils in mainstream schools by comparing experiences of pupils with a placement in a specialist resource centre, to those without.

Specialist resource centres are typically located within mainstream schools and offer small-group or individual teaching, access to autism-friendly spaces, and support from staff with specialist expertise, while enabling pupils to attend mainstream classes for part of the school day.

We combined measures of pupils' academic, social and psychological outcomes over three years with insights from pupils, families and staff.

Research Findings

Across four studies and a three-year period, pupils supported through SRCs showed higher attendance rates, greater perceived support and stronger academic progress in core subjects over time.

Pupils and families also reported improved wellbeing, school belonging and confidence in schools' ability to meet need.

Findings suggest that SRCs function as "protective microsystems" within mainstream schools. Predictable routines, access to quiet and sensory-safe spaces, and sustained relationships with specialist staff enabled pupils to regulate, re-engage with learning and participate in mainstream classes without the constant threat of overwhelm or exclusion.

The research also identified wider whole-school benefits. Staff reported increased autism awareness, clearer pathways for support and reduced pressure on mainstream classrooms. One Head of Centre explained:

"There's a lot of goodwill towards the Centre and wider autistic population...it's just become a natural thing like breathing ...it's just second nature that they understand - they understand the reasons why that child's finding that queue difficult."

- Specialist provision works, but only when it is properly resourced and embedded within whole-school inclusion.
- Relationships, predictability and access to trusted support are central to positive outcomes for neurodivergent pupils in mainstream schools.
- Sustainable inclusion requires long-term investment in specialist expertise, workforce development and inclusive school systems, not one-off interventions or diagnosis-led support alone.

Parents and former pupils described significant longer-term impacts:

"He's come on leaps and bounds since he's been here... he goes to every lesson, he's doing all his GCSEs, and he feels safe in school."

"The support I got from the Cullum Centre was invaluable... without it, I would not be where I am today."

Policy Implications

1. Design schools for inclusion

Move beyond defining inclusion as a principle and establish it as a core feature of school design. Effective provision requires clear non-negotiables, including specialist staffing ratios, sensory-considered environments, access to a safe base, planned pathways for inclusion, family liaison, and whole-school workforce development. Inclusion should be embedded across curriculum, behaviour, pastoral and SEND systems rather than delivered through isolated interventions.

2. Strengthen the workforce

Inclusive practice depends on a skilled and confident workforce. Investment is needed in specialist provision, protected planning time, and ongoing professional development for teachers, support staff and leaders. Schools should also be better connected to wider local support systems, including mental health, social care and specialist services, so that responsibility for inclusion is shared rather than fragmented.

3. Align accountability with inclusion

Accountability frameworks should recognise and incentivise inclusive practice. Inspection, performance measures and funding arrangements should value schools' capacity to support diverse learners, not simply attainment outcomes. Public reporting should reflect inclusive approaches and outcomes, ensuring that schools are rewarded for creating environments where all pupils can thrive.

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