THE SCHOOL LEADER'S GUIDE TO SEND

Other titles from Bloomsbury Education

SEND Strategies for the Primary Years: Practical ideas and expert advice to use pre-diagnosis by Georgina Durrant

SEND Strategies for the Secondary Years: Practical ideas and expert advice to support and understand young people by Georgina Durrant

The Inclusive Classroom: A new approach to differentiation by Daniel Sobel and Sara Alston

The Strategic SENCo: How to lead whole school inclusion with vision and purpose by Kenny Wheeler

The Ultimate Guide to Adaptive Teaching: Confidently meeting the needs of every learner by Sue Cowley

Other titles by the same author

Starting Out as a Primary SENCo: Finding your first post, the first year and beyond by Lynn How

Further titles from Bloomsbury Education are available at:
www.bloomsbury.com/uk/education

THE SCHOOL LEADER'S GUIDE TO SEND

Inclusive leadership in practice



LYNN HOW

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain, 2026 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
This edition published in Great Britain, 2026 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Lynn How, 2026
Illustrations copyright © Lynn How, 2026
Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

Lynn How has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be: i) reproduced or transmitted in any form, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by means of any information storage or retrieval system without prior permission in writing from the publishers; or ii) used or reproduced in any way for the training, development or operation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI technologies. The rights holders expressly reserve this publication from the text and data mining exception as per Article 4(3) of the Digital Single Market Directive (EU) 2019/790

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-80199-769-0; eBook: 978-1-80199-770-6

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1 (paperback)

Cover design by James Fraser

Typeset by Lumina Datamatics Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ Books, Padstow, Cornwall



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters
For product safety related questions contact productsafety@bloomsbury.com

1 Barriers to school leaders' SEND knowledge and understanding

With the best will in the world, it's impossible to do everything we set out to in a day, a week, a year, or even a lifetime. So as you read this section, please be kind to yourself. There are myriad reasons why school leaders aren't as clued up on SEND as they'd like to be. In a profession where we tend to self-flagellate over just about everything, don't add this to your list. This section highlights some common barriers school leaders face when trying to understand and embed inclusive practice in their schools.

Ah, where to start with the barriers school leaders face when trying to create an inclusive environment? It can feel like a perpetual game of Whack-a-Mole – just as you deal with one issue, another pops up. In this section, I outline some barriers that are frequently mentioned.

Of course, your school will have its own nuances rooted in your context, history and demographics, but many challenges are common across settings. Here's a brief overview of some that come to mind – see if you can get a full house on Barrier Bingo as you read this list!

Funding (or the lack of it)

Let's start with the big one. Meeting the individual needs of students with SEND is difficult when you're constantly fighting for resources. Specialist staff, appropriate interventions and even accessible classrooms don't just magically appear – they cost money.

The mythical £6,000 per-student notional budget (which is not a legally enforceable funding assumption) was set over a decade ago, and, oddly enough, while inflation and the cost of living have risen, the budget has not. That shortfall is just one drop in a much wider sea of financial pressures. Put simply, it's not getting any easier.

Staffing

Even if you manage to juggle the finances, securing the right staff to support complex needs is a major hurdle. Recruiting highly skilled SENDCos, learning support assistants (LSAs) or external specialists (speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, etc.) is no mean feat, especially when there are national shortages across these professions.

Although therapeutic input should be funded by the local authority (LA) when provision is specified in an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), getting that specification agreed is becoming increasingly challenging. Schools now often have to buy in their own therapists. With such high need and limited health service capacity, this is both widely necessary and, frankly, a luxury.

Even when you do find the right people, getting them into the right roles – and keeping them there – can feel like a logistical nightmare. Of course, you can't actually stop people from moving on, but creating a culture where the grass doesn't look greener elsewhere goes a long way. This doesn't have to be expensive; it's more about mindset and culture (more on that later).

Ongoing training

Ongoing training is another major challenge. Staff need the knowledge and strategies to support students well, but leaders are already spinning a hundred other plates. There simply aren't enough INSET days (known in my house as 'bug days' because my son once thought they were insect days and wanted to know why his sister got a bug day and he didn't!) to cover everything. As you pay support staff by the hour, you need to consider the best use of their time as well. When so much energy goes into firefighting, strategic CPD, especially for LSAs, is often squeezed out.

Time constraints

The SEND Code of Practice is a genuinely useful document... if you ever get the time to implement it properly! School leaders are stretched between meeting students' needs, keeping on top of endless admin and still finding space to lead teaching and learning – and that's before you even attempt to maintain a personal life or a sense of humour.

I've certainly felt a marked shift since the curriculum ramp-up in 2014, and another sharp one after the post-COVID surge in SEND demand. It's no wonder that time – or the lack of it – remains one of the biggest obstacles to embedding inclusive practice.

External pressures

Governors and trustees are often well-meaning but their understanding of SEND – and of their role within it – can vary widely. If you're working with a supportive, knowledgeable, friendly governing body, you're doing well. In my experience, they can sometimes be more concerned with performance data and academic results than inclusion. If they're also a parent at the school, it's not uncommon for their own child's needs to dominate their perspective.

It's a balancing act: demonstrating progress and maintaining standards while also supporting students who don't always fit neatly into the 'expected progress' narrative. Ofsted inspections create a lot of anxiety. There is, unfortunately, still a judgment at the end of it, leaving leaders up and down the country wondering whether anything has been learned in the wake of events over the past few years.

At the time of writing, the new framework places a strong emphasis on inclusion, student voice and parental engagement – all positive steps in principle. However, SENDCos in my network report that, without any increase in release time or resources to support this shift, their stress levels have risen sharply.

Leaders are trying to meet Ofsted requirements while also working towards meaningful, student-centred inclusion. But the pressure to secure a favourable Ofsted rating can sometimes result in a tokenistic approach to inclusion rather than the deep, sustainable change students actually need.

Lack of specialist provision

For students with complex SEND needs, mainstream schools aren't always the most appropriate setting. Yet here they are, because there simply aren't enough specialist placements available. This creates a huge barrier for leaders who are trying to adapt a mainstream environment to meet needs that exceed what

the school can realistically offer. It's frustrating and often heart-wrenching to know that some students could thrive in a specialist environment that just isn't available.

I've heard recently that many schools previously categorised as supporting pupils with moderate learning difficulties (MLD) are now reclassifying as settings for severe learning difficulties (SLD). This may help pupils with SLD who are currently 'stuck' in mainstream and not having their needs fully met. I'm also hearing that some specialist providers are shifting their intake to Year 3 and above. Inevitably, this has a knock-on effect for primary schools, particularly given the rising levels of need in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1.

Parental expectations

Parents, understandably, want the very best for their children, and many have very clear (and sometimes very fixed) views about what that should look like. Balancing those expectations with the realistic limits of what a mainstream school can offer is tricky – to put it mildly. You may find yourself having difficult conversations explaining, often repeatedly, that a school can't meet every need perfectly, however hard it tries. This challenge is compounded by the temptation to gloss over gaps in provision rather than name them openly, a response that's closely linked with wider systemic issues. Honesty's harder in the moment, but more sustainable in the long run.

Policy and legislation

Government policy can be a double-edged sword. Frameworks such as the Children and Families Act, the SEND Code of Practice and the Wellbeing Guidance are incredibly valuable – on paper. Too often, national policy sets expectations without fully supporting schools to meet them.

Maintaining staff wellbeing

An inclusive environment doesn't just care for its students – it cares for its staff. Sustaining an 'anti-burnout establishment' matters for everyone: teachers, LSAs and leaders alike. The pressures of supporting students with SEND within a

stretched system makes staff wellbeing an essential leadership priority, not an optional one. Keeping morale and functionality intact is even more important when expectations are high and resources are limited.

School leaders' understanding of SEND

Some school leaders have a fairly limited understanding of the SENDCo's role and the complexities involved in supporting students with SEND. The *National SENDCo Workforce Survey* (Bath Spa, 2021), found that only 53 per cent of primary SENDCos and just 25 per cent of secondary SENDCos felt their role was fully understood by their senior leadership teams (SLT).

So, while this book may involve a certain amount of preaching to the converted, it's worth acknowledging that, in some settings, this lack of understanding stretches SENDCos across too many responsibilities, reduces the time allocated to the role and results in insufficient support for SEND-specific initiatives. Because of current pressures, school leaders may understandably focus on immediate academic outcomes at the expense of long-term SENDCo SEND strategies, underestimating the time, training and resources required across the whole staff. But without a clear, strategic grasp of SEND, SLTs will struggle to deliver whole-school, inclusive education.

Minimum and maximum offers in mainstream education

So, what can (and should) mainstream schools be offering? In an ideal world, every child would receive the highest-quality education in an inclusive, well-resourced setting. In reality, mainstream schools are asked to go above and beyond their capacity while still operating within the confines of 'best endeavours', as set out in Section 66 of the Children and Families Act (2014):

> *If a registered pupil or a student at a school or other institution has special educational needs, the appropriate authority must, in exercising its functions in relation to the school or other institution, use its best endeavours to secure that the special educational provision called for by the pupil's or student's special educational needs is made.*
>
> (Excerpt from the Children and Families Act 2014, legislation.gov.uk).

This offer isn't just about legal compliance; it's about meeting needs, supporting personal growth and helping each student achieve their full potential. This section of the book, then, explores the current expectations for mainstream schools, focusing on universal provision (best-quality teaching for all students) and tiered support (targeted and adapted interventions for learners requiring additional help).

At its heart, this is about building a school culture where excellent teaching is embedded throughout, benefiting all learners, including those with SEND. Of course, many schools are struggling to offer the basics comfortably, let alone provide a gold-standard offer. It's a massive grey area and my aim is to help your SLT understand both the bare minimum and the realistic upper limits of what you can provide. At the other end of the spectrum, I also want to help you spot when your LA might be taking the proverbial 'biscuit' (feel free to substitute a stronger word!).

Before you dive into the reflection questions...

You might not have all the answers yet, and that's absolutely fine. This isn't about catching you out. It's an opportunity to pause, reflect and take stock of your current practice. Some questions may feel uncomfortable or reveal areas for development, but they're intended as useful touchpoints you can revisit over time. Think of them less as a checklist and more as markers of progress as your SEND provision evolves.

Reflection questions

- Do budget constraints affect your ability to implement effective SEND provision? What creative solutions have you found, if any, to help with this?
- Have you faced difficulties recruiting or retaining staff with the skills needed to support SEND students?
- How do you ensure the right people are in place, and what could improve things in your setting?
- How do you manage your staff's ongoing SEND training needs?
- Are there knowledge or practice gaps that still need attention, and what methods (such as internal webinars) might help?

- With so many responsibilities on your plate, how do you prioritise SEND within your school's wider agenda? Are there areas where more time could be given to inclusive practices? If so, how might you reallocate resources?
- Do you experience tension between focusing on inclusion and meeting performance metrics set by Ofsted or your governing body? How do you balance inclusive practice with external expectations?
- Do you have students in your school whose needs can't be fully met in a mainstream setting? How do you navigate that, and what support (if any) do you receive from your LA or specialist provisions?
- How do you manage conversations with parents when their expectations exceed what your school can realistically offer? Have you encountered challenges in maintaining transparency and trust?
- How do current government policies and legislation impact your ability to support SEND students? Do you feel schools are given enough support to meet these requirements?
- What steps are you taking to ensure that your staff, especially those supporting SEND students, aren't overworked or burnt out?
- How do you look after your own wellbeing as a school leader?
- Do you feel your SLT has a strong grasp of the complexities involved in supporting SEND students? If not, what might help deepen their understanding?