

## **Inclusion: is it working?**

A number of parents have said how difficult it is to get mainstream schools to fully embrace inclusion. It won't surprise you to learn that OFSTED, an independent government department that inspects all schools in England, has published a report that shares the same view. The report only looks at schools in England but some of the problems encountered are likely to be found in schools across the country. OFSTED found that although most schools are committed to meeting special needs, there has been an increase in the number of pupils placed in independent special schools and pupil referral units.

### **Background**

- Education Act 1993 set out, in a Code of Practice, the duties of the Local Education Authorities (LEA) with regard to Special Educational Needs (SEN).
- Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA) strengthened the rights of children to attend a mainstream school. Unless their parent chose differently, or there were no 'reasonable steps' that the LEA or school could take to make that choice compatible with 'efficient education for other children'.
- Disability Discrimination Act 1995 placed new duties on schools. Schools were not to treat disabled pupils less favourably than others and should make 'reasonable adjustments' so that these pupils were not disadvantaged.
- These two Acts and their accompanying guidance are the backbone of the Government's education policy. The legislation expects mainstream schools to fully include all pupils. This means making changes to accommodation, organisation, curriculum, and teaching methods. The law places a duty on schools and LEAs to ensure this happens.
- In 2002 a revised Code of Practice took effect. Although very similar to the original, it took account of the new rights and duties of the SENDA 2001. It set out five main principles: -
  1. Children with SEN should have their needs met.
  2. Their needs would normally be met in mainstream schools.
  3. Children should be asked for their views and have them taken into account.
  4. Parents have a vital role in supporting their children's education
  5. Children with SEN should be offered full access to a broad and balanced curriculum

The revised Code emphasised the importance of progress in learning and new action stages were introduced: 'school action' where extra provision was given that was different and additional to that for most other pupils; if the pupil made no progress then the 'school action plus' stage started and further provision given; and where a pupil's needs were more severe and complex, the LEA could issue a statement detailing the specific and exceptional provision needed.

- The legislation and guidance, known as the 'inclusion framework' have been in place for over two years. It takes time for inclusion policies to be fully effective and during the process there has been a great deal of debate about what inclusion should mean for pupils in both mainstream and special schools.

The OFSTED report examines whether the inclusion framework has made a difference to the way schools cope with a wider range of pupil needs. It assesses how real was the vision of inclusion in schools and makes recommendations to the Government that will support its strategy plan for SEN, 'Removing Barriers to Achievement' (DfES 2004).

### **Inclusion Framework – Main Findings**

- There is a growing awareness of the benefits of inclusion and there has been some improvement in school practices.
- There has been little change to proportion of pupils with SEN in mainstream schools or on the range of needs that schools can meet. The numbers of pupils placed in independent special schools and pupil referral units has increased.
- Most mainstream schools are committed to meeting special needs but only a few are happy to admit student with complex needs. Pupils with social and behavioural difficulties put a strain on inclusion policies.
- The schools that do meet special needs well are in the minority. Their success is due to effective whole-school planning by committed managers, skilled teaching and support staff, rigorous monitoring and high expectations.

- Many schools have difficulty taking all the steps needed to enable pupils with SEN to participate fully in school life. They do not have high enough expectations for these pupils and progress in learning was slower than it should be for a significant number of pupils.
- Few schools carry out systematic evaluations of their provision for SEN and cannot tell if it is effective or value for money.
- Mainstream schools did not make enough of the potential to adapt the curriculum.
- The teaching of pupils with SEN varied in quality and a high proportion of lessons seen did not meet their needs. Organisation of teaching assistants, who have a vital role, did not give enough opportunities for pupils to develop their skills, understanding and independence.
- There were few examples of effective partnership between special schools and mainstream schools.
- More than half the schools visited had no disability access plans and where plans did exist, the majority focussed on accommodation only, and not on access to curriculum and day-to-day school activities.

OFSTED have recommended that the Department of Education and Skills (DfES) should continue to work with schools to ensure that: -

1. Mainstream schools improve their ability to include a wider range of special needs and disability
2. Local decisions about the admission of pupils with SEN are kept under close review
3. Special schools and mainstream schools work productively together on curriculum and teaching.
4. Pupils with SEN play a full part in school life and receive an education relevant to their needs
5. Schools thoroughly evaluate their provision for SEN thoroughly and take note of the report to improve standards of achievement.

### **How does this help parents?**

It is your right, by law, to choose mainstream education for your child. If you want **good inclusive** mainstream education then that will be hard to find. Some key signs to look for in a school that is inclusive are: -

- Clearly defined SEN policy and Disability Access plan. Ask your school, or prospective school for a copy.
- Find out what training is given to the support staff
- What has the school done in the past to include pupils with special needs? Are there examples of where they have made adjustments?
- Check the school timetable to see if there are potential difficulties for your child and ask how the school will adapt or make arrangements to include them (e.g. playtime, lunch hour, sports, school trips, after school clubs, assemblies).
- How will they measure if your child is making progress?
- What links do they have with special schools; do they get advice or training from them?
- Do you feel that the Head and staff really welcome the opportunity to include your child in the school?
- Does the school listen and take note of parent concerns?
- What did the last OFSTED report on the school say about SEN?

You can download a free copy of this latest report or any school reports from the OFSTED web site ([www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications)). If you don't have access to a computer, many libraries offer free use of computers. It would be a good idea to ask the Head of the school for their comments on the report and whether their own school is better at inclusion.

In the report, OFSTED did mention comments from some head teachers who were concerned that if their school had a good reputation for including pupils with special needs, then even more pupils with extra needs would want to enrol. This would put greater pressure on teachers and staff, who may not be able to cope and then the education of other pupils would be affected. (Could this explain why some schools have been so slow to follow the inclusion framework?)

You will be very lucky to find a school that is able to meet all the requirements for inclusion. But there are schools that are making an effort, even if they have not fully succeeded. If a school is willing to listen to parents' concerns and work with them, then that school is more likely to achieve inclusion in the future. The DfES and the government are aware that more work has to be done if inclusion is going to be more than just a pipe dream.

If you have concerns about your child's education then do talk to the teacher, if that does not help, go to the SENCO. If you are still unhappy, speak to the Head Teacher and remind them that the school has statutory duties to meet your child's needs. The next step is to write the school governors, in particular to the one with responsibility for SEN (all governing bodies must have someone) and tell them what your concerns are, who you have spoken to already and why you are not satisfied with their answers. Again emphasise that you believe the school is failing to meet your child's needs and failing in its duty. This governor might want to meet with you to discuss the problem before taking the matter up before the school board. Governors meet about twice a term. If this seems like a long process, it is! But you have to show that you have given the school every opportunity to respond to your concerns. A shorter route might be to contact your local Parent Advisor (see Spring 2004 newsletter). Every LEA has a parent advisor who can give impartial advice about education issues. Ask your school or LEA for details or go to the web site at [www.parentpartnership.org.uk](http://www.parentpartnership.org.uk).

Other useful contacts are: -

**ACE** (Advisory Centre for Education) advises on state-funded education in England and Wales

General advice line 2-5pm Monday to Friday: **0808 800 5793** Web Site: [www.ace-ed.org.uk](http://www.ace-ed.org.uk)

**CSIE** (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education) works in the UK and overseas to promote inclusion.

Answers queries on law. Information leaflets. Works directly with parents.

Tel: **0117 344 4007** Fax: **0117 344 4005** Web site: <http://inclusion.uwe.ac.uk/csie/>

**IPSEA** (Independent Panel for Special Education Advice) covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Offers free, independent advice and free second professional opinions (Educational psychologists, therapists, teachers) Gives advice on statementing, tribunals.

Advice Line England and Wales: Mon – Thurs 10 –4 and 7 –9 (Free phone) 0800 0184016

Address: IPSEA, 6, Carlow Mews, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1EA

General enquiries: 01394 380518 Advice lines are very busy so you have to persevere!