School Leaders Urge Chancellor to Tackle SEND Crisis

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IRIS Software group, a global leader in accounting, HR, payroll, and education software solutions, has released new research from its Education arm, revealing that increased funding for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) is the top priority for school leaders ahead of the Chancellor's Spring Statement on March 26.

Nine in 10 (90%) school and trust leaders say the Chancellor should prioritise education spending on SEND, according to the research from IRIS Education, with a similar number (91%) reporting that securing funding is a challenge.

Rounding out school and trust leaders' top three spending priorities were upgrading school estates (52%) and increasing teacher pay (42%)

The research, which surveyed 130 leaders from authority-backed schools, academies and trusts, found the time it required to develop education, health and care plans (EHCPs) was a key factor in their SEND challenges (69%). This ranked below a lack of money to fund SEND programmes (85%) and the rising number of children being diagnosed (90%), which were the top challenges.

"School leaders are caught between a rock and a hard place. It's their obligation to provide the best care and support for SEND students, but that costs money and resources that they don't have. So, it's little surprise that it's their primary ask of the Chancellor.

“Finding ways to use the finite resources – specifically cash and staff – more efficiently is a must. It’s interesting that many school leaders noted that, if given funding to invest in technology, they’d direct this to their SEND services, highlighting the potential for smarter solutions to enable educators to focus more on students and less on the administrative burden,” said Simon Freeman, Managing Director, IRIS Education.

As well as struggling to manage the influx of children, leaders say they are also facing a shortage of specialist teachers, with two in five (42%) local authority-backed schools saying a lack of special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs) is disrupting their SEND provision.

The findings follow analysis by **The Guardian** that at least a dozen councils have accumulated SEND spending deficits of more than £100m, with one council spending £312m more on SEND than they are allocated by the government.

Many leaders surveyed said that they would turn to technology to help mitigate the challenges they’re facing. For those schools and trusts that are planning on investing in technology in the next three years, 59% said they would dedicate it to software that supports SEND provision. Meanwhile, half (51%) said they would invest in staff training and development platforms, and a third (35%) would invest in improved communication tools for parents.

In July 2024, IRIS partnered with **PAGS**, a SEND management tool that helps SENCOs and teachers to assess, plan appropriate support strategies, and track the progress of students with additional needs. Crucially, using PAGS can dramatically cut the amount of time required to gather the evidence for an EHCP application.

“EHCPs are essential in ensuring that SEND students have the same opportunities as their peers, but the process of creating and managing them places a significant burden on schools. The time and effort required can take valuable resources away from direct student support.

“The real solution lies in making EHCP management more efficient, and our partnership with PAGS is already helping schools achieve this. But long-term change requires more than just school-level efforts—the government must work with local authorities and trusts to implement the right technology and drive sustainable reform across the SEND system,” continued Freeman.

The IRIS Education Leaders' Survey 2025 is available **here** and was released ahead of the marquee webinar, The Smarter School: New Strategies for Building Efficiency and Sustainability in 2025.You can register **here** to watch the webinar or receive a recording.