

SEND Inclusion in Mainstream Schools

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Every school wants to be inclusive. The harder question is whether schools have the resources, spaces and support to make inclusion work in practice.

Across England, SEND provision is under growing pressure. Many schools are being asked to support more pupils with complex needs, while also managing stretched budgets and staffing pressures. Recent reporting on Sutton Trust polling found that two-fifths of school leaders in England had cut support for pupils with SEND, with reductions affecting teaching assistants and other support staff.

At the same time, government policy continues to point towards more inclusive mainstream education. That ambition is understandable. Many children with SEND can and should thrive in mainstream schools. But inclusion is not created by policy language alone. It depends on people, training, space, equipment, time and the right resources.

Procurement will not solve the SEND crisis. But better procurement can help schools make more thoughtful decisions about the products, services and environments that support pupils day to day.

Inclusion starts with the environment

When schools think about SEND, they often start with staffing. That is understandable. Skilled adults are essential.

But the physical environment matters too. A noisy corridor, harsh lighting, cramped classroom or poorly arranged intervention space can make the school day harder for pupils who already find it difficult to regulate, communicate or concentrate.

For some pupils, the environment is the difference between coping and not coping.

Before buying new resources, schools should look at the spaces pupils are using now. Are they calm? Are they predictable? Are they accessible? Are they being used for their intended purpose, or has the “quiet room” become a storage area?

Simple improvements can make a real difference:

- Better lighting
- Acoustic panels or soft furnishings
- Clear signage
- Defined zones in classrooms
- Adjustable furniture
- Sensory regulation spaces
- Safe outdoor areas
- Low-distraction intervention rooms

The aim is not to create separate spaces that isolate pupils. It is to create flexible environments that help pupils take part.

Be careful with “SEND products”

The education market is full of products described as SEND-friendly, inclusive or sensory. Some are excellent. Others are less useful.

A product is not automatically helpful because it has the word “sensory” on the label. Schools need to ask what need it is meeting, who will use it, how it will be supervised and whether staff know how to use it properly.

For example, a sensory room can be valuable, but only if it is planned carefully. Without staff training and clear routines, it can become either underused or

overused. A set of wobble cushions may help some pupils focus, but distract others. Noise-cancelling headphones may support one child and create communication barriers for another.

Good SEND procurement starts with pupils, not catalogues.

Schools should ask:

- Which pupils is this for?
- What need are we trying to meet?
- How will we know whether it is working?
- Who will maintain it?
- What training do staff need?
- Could this unintentionally exclude or stigmatise pupils?
- Is there a cheaper or simpler solution?

This does not mean schools should avoid specialist products. It means they should buy with purpose.

Furniture can make or break access

Furniture is often overlooked in SEND planning, but it affects posture, attention, independence and comfort.

Some pupils need adjustable-height tables. Others need supportive seating, writing slopes, footrests or space for mobility equipment. Some need individual workstations for short periods; others need flexible seating that allows them to move without disrupting the class.

In many schools, furniture has built up over years. Chairs and tables are mixed, damaged or poorly matched to pupil age and size. That can be uncomfortable for any pupil, but for some pupils with SEND it can create a real barrier.

When reviewing furniture, schools should consider:

- Is seating suitable for different body sizes and needs?
- Can wheelchair users move freely?
- Are tables suitable for practical tasks, technology and support equipment?
- Can furniture be rearranged quickly for group work, intervention or quiet work?

- Are there safe options for pupils who need movement?
- Are staff using furniture to support learning, or simply fitting pupils into what already exists?

Inclusive furniture does not have to make a classroom look clinical. The best options are practical, durable and flexible enough to support different pupils without making them feel singled out.

Assistive technology: useful, but only with a plan

Assistive technology can be powerful. Text-to-speech, speech-to-text, reading pens, visual timers, communication tools, tablets and specialist software can all support access to learning.

But technology can also become expensive clutter if it is bought without a plan.

Before purchasing assistive technology, schools should think about compatibility, training and long-term use. Will the tool work with existing systems? Can pupils use it across different classrooms? Do staff understand when to encourage it and when to step back? Is it robust enough for daily school life?

Schools should also think about stigma. If a pupil has to use a device that looks unusual, requires constant adult help or only works in one room, they may avoid using it altogether.

The best assistive technology is often the technology that becomes part of normal classroom practice.

Outdoor space is part of SEND provision

Outdoor areas are often discussed in terms of sport, play and site safety. They should also be part of SEND planning.

For many pupils, outdoor space offers movement, regulation, communication and social development. A well-designed outdoor area can give pupils a chance to reset before returning to learning. A poorly designed one can increase stress, conflict or risk.

Schools may want to consider:

- Quiet outdoor zones

- Sensory planting
- All-weather surfaces
- Clear boundaries
- Seating away from busy play areas
- Accessible routes
- Outdoor learning shelters
- Movement equipment
- Safe spaces for small group work

These changes do not always require a full playground redesign. Sometimes a small, well-planned area can have a big impact.

Do not forget staff

No product can replace trained staff.

If schools are buying SEND equipment, furniture, technology or services, staff need to know how to use them confidently. Otherwise, even good purchases can fail.

Training should be part of the procurement conversation. Suppliers should be able to explain how products work, what good use looks like and what mistakes to avoid. For more specialist items, schools should ask whether demonstration, setup, aftercare or staff guidance is included.

This is especially important when budgets are tight. A slightly cheaper product may not be better value if staff are left to work everything out themselves.

A simple SEND procurement checklist

Before buying SEND-related products or services, schools should ask:

1. What specific need are we trying to meet?
2. Which pupils will benefit?
3. Have pupils, parents or staff been consulted?
4. Is the product suitable for our building and timetable?
5. Does it support inclusion, or does it separate pupils unnecessarily?
6. What training is required?
7. How will we measure impact?
8. What are the maintenance or replacement costs?

9. Can it be used flexibly across year groups?
10. Is this the best use of limited budget?

Inclusion is practical

It is easy for inclusion to become an abstract word. In schools, it is usually much more practical.

It is the pupil who needs a quieter place to start the day. The child who needs a chair that helps them sit comfortably. The young person who can access writing through technology. The class that needs better acoustics. The teaching assistant who needs the right resources to support independence rather than create dependence.

SEND inclusion does not happen because a school buys one product or creates one room. It happens when leaders make hundreds of small, thoughtful decisions that remove barriers.

Procurement is one of those decisions. Used well, it can help schools create environments where more pupils can participate, belong and succeed.