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SENDing students soaring: Enabling the success of students with SEND through MAT wide CPD strategy

What's the BIG Idea for SEND?

Project Focus

This project aimed to develop and implement a strategic, trust-wide approach to improving outcomes for students with SEND across a diverse Multi Academy Trust (MAT) of 32 settings. The initiative focused on four key strands:

1. outstanding leadership,
2. highly effective adaptive teaching,
3. embedded support, and
4. focused specialist interventions.

The overarching goal was to raise aspirations, improve teaching practice, and ensure consistent, high-quality provision for the 3,500+ SEND learners across the trust.

Introduction

Led by a Special School Headteacher and the Director of Quality of Education, the "SENDing Students Soaring" initiative was designed to address the varied needs of learners with SEND across a large MAT comprising 9 secondary schools, 8 primaries, 13 special schools, and one independent specialist college. With over 11,800 students and 2,500 staff, the trust recognised the need for a coherent, evidence-informed strategy that could be adapted to suit different contexts while maintaining high expectations and consistent standards. With almost 3,500 pupils identified with SEND across the organisation the ultimate aim of this project is to improve the progress and achievement of this 29% of the student cohort.

The project began in spring and was built on the principle that SEND leadership and teaching must be embedded across all levels of the organisation—from MAT leaders to classroom teachers. Specifically the project was designed to impact most directly upon the leadership teams of each academy, particularly the SENCO and Teaching and Learning Lead.

 **More inclusive high-quality teaching**

 **More inclusive ethos/culture in the setting**

 **Increased attendance of learners with SEND**

 **Better outcomes for learners with SEND**

 **Earlier and more accurate identification of SEN**

 **Increased engagement of learners with SEND**

Implementation

The initiative was structured around four strategic strands:



1. Outstanding leadership

The vision of this strand was to enable the success of students with SEND and for the interpretation of success to be widened to incorporate students' personal development as well as academic success. The Deputy CEO led the introduction of the strategy making it clear that the project was about high aspirations and high expectations of leaders as well as students. SEND leadership was repositioned as a whole-school responsibility. All headteachers and SENCOs received external training under the theme "Every Leader a Leader of SEND." SENCOs were provided with data profiles comparing their school's SEND data to national benchmarks and supported to lead strategic improvements.

2. Highly effective adaptive teaching

This strand was about adaptive teaching practice. Meeting the diverse needs of students in a classroom is undoubtedly a challenging task. Research highlights that teachers can adopt specific approaches to improve outcomes for all pupils, including those with SEND. The SEND Code of Practice emphasises the pivotal role of teachers—not SENCOs, TAs, or external specialists—in improving outcomes for SEND students, aligning with evidence that effective teaching significantly impacts student progress (The Sutton Trust, 2011). The trust introduced the SEND 5-a-Day framework, based on the EEF's guidance for SEND in mainstream schools. This included five evidence-based strategies to support inclusive teaching. SENCOs and Teaching & Learning leads collaborated to audit current practice, identify areas for development, and create tailored implementation plans.

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3. Embedded support

At the heart of this strand was our response to the Maximising the Impact of Teaching Assistants (MITA) research by Webster and Blatchford, which highlights how students can develop learned helplessness when support is not deployed effectively. This phenomenon had been observed in some of our schools, prompting a strategic shift in how teaching assistants (TAs) were trained and utilised. We introduced targeted TA training focused on promoting student independence, alongside teacher development to ensure TAs were deployed purposefully and in ways that enhance learning rather than create dependency. This alignment of training and practice was central to our goal of enabling independence for learners with SEND.

For more info on the MITA research, see the [Education Endowment Foundation's project summary](#) 

4. Focused specialist interventions

'Enabling access' was the key to this strand. SENCOs were supported to improve identification of need and access to specialist advice. A group of special school 'experts' have been established – *the Needs' Nurturers to advise and guide colleagues regarding accessibility issues.*

CPD timeline highlights:

More details in Appendix

January–April: Strategy launch, collaborative planning, and staff audits.

May–July: Conferences and implementation planning.

September–December: School launches, HUB sessions, drop-in clinics, and evaluation.

All schools were required to participate, and communication was maintained through face-to-face meetings, online hubs, newsletters, and briefings.

Outcomes and impact

The project has already delivered significant results:

- 94% of schools reviewed and corrected their SEND data ahead of the census.
- 74% ensured all students had a clearly identified need.
- 100% of schools created and launched implementation plans.
- 87% reported raised profile of SEND students.
- 91% confirmed collaboration between SENCOs and T&L leads to embed SEND 5-a-Day strategies.
- Attendance of SEND students increased across all sectors.
- Suspensions and exclusions for SEND students dropped below national averages.
- GCSE mock data showed improved Attainment 8 scores for SEND K students.
- Ofsted reports from all inspected schools highlighted SEND as a strength.

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Outcomes and impact (continued)

Additional outcomes included:

- Increased SENCO confidence
- Stronger collaboration between SENCOs and T&L leads
- 23 staff enrolled in Level 3 TA apprenticeships
- Improved behaviour and engagement
- Consistent use of pupil passports and adaptive teaching strategies

Key learning

- SEND leadership must be distributed across all levels of the organisation.
- SEND and Teaching & Learning are interdependent and should be developed together.
- Data-informed decision-making empowers schools to target improvements effectively.
- CPD must be sustained, collaborative, and tailored to individual school contexts.
- Communication across a large trust requires flexibility and multiple formats.
- Embedding SEND into quality assurance processes ensures long-term impact.

Conclusion

“SENDing Students Soaring” has transformed how SEND is led, taught, and supported across the Shaw Education Trust. By combining strategic leadership, evidence-based teaching, and collaborative CPD, the initiative has raised expectations and improved outcomes for thousands of learners.

This model is scalable and adaptable. While designed for a large MAT, individual schools or smaller trusts can adopt key elements—such as the SEND 5-a-Day framework, SENCO/T&L collaboration, and data-driven planning—to drive meaningful change in their own settings.

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Appendix I

SEND students soaring step-by-step guide:

Outstanding leadership

1. Establish Trust ambition to 'SEND students soaring' – high aspirations
2. All Headteachers receive external training on 'Every Leader a Leader of SEND'
3. All SENCOs receive external training on 'Every Leader a Leader of SEND'
4. All SENCOs receive a school specific data 'SEND in a Nutshell' tool in which their data on e.g., attendance, exclusions, identification, numbers on SEN Support and EHCP are compared with national data and training on how to interpret this data and use it to support their leadership teams in becoming leaders of SEND. Specific foci of training on knowing needs of students and target setting and recording small steps of progress.
5. All schools RAG rate themselves against a SEND audit to help identify areas for development. Establish a list of non-negotiables and priorities.
6. SENCOs meet with Teaching and Learning Leads to draw up their Implementation Plan – a School specific improvement project to tackle an aspect of SEND / Teaching & Learning provision.
7. Hear the SENCO voice – what is their priority?
8. Ensure SEND is a specific focus area for the MAT Quality Assurance process. Any QAF (Framework) could detail very precisely what the Leads should be evaluating and guidance provided to help them to do this.
9. Open yourself up to possibility of rigour of project being critiqued by an external audience by joining external projects run by e.g., NASEN or submitting articles to Chartered College.
10. Work with MIS Lead to ensure that the MIS system can deliver precise, timely data for SENCOs.

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Appendix I (continued)

Highly effective adaptive teaching

1. Introduce the SEND 5-a-Day approach, rooted in Strand 3 of the EEF's Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools guidance. This evidence-based framework identifies five key strategies to support SEND students while benefiting all learners.
2. Consider developing a 'flipbook' containing research-backed explanations, practical examples, and video demonstrations of each strand. The flipbook can then serve as a dynamic resource for CPD, pre-reading, and implementation planning, supporting HUB sessions and fostering collaboration.
3. Conduct a staff audit, where teachers evaluated their practices against the five approaches. This self-assessment highlighted each school's weakest areas, providing a foundation for focused improvement.
4. Host a two-day conference led by external expert to complement the flipbook.

The conference could cover:

- Day 1: SENCOs only - Pressures of the SENCO, Impact on Quality of Teaching and Learning, Green paper: what the role means and what the role means to you, then delving into the 5 a day strategy linked to the flip book resources.
 - Day 2: SENCO and Teaching and Learning Lead - Principles of effective professional development, changing behaviour of teachers, Implementation Plan Walk Through and finally working in collaboration groups to start to discuss implementations for each individual setting.
5. SENCO and T&L lead collaborate to create their school's initial implementation plan around the SEND 5-a-Day strategies. Begin process by SENCOs and T&L leads triangulating audit information with their own QA and monitoring data and the findings from the SEND audit and Nutshell profiles
 6. Day 2 could be an opportunity to facilitate a session on developing implementation plans, using the SEND 5-a-Day flipbook as a key resource. Group staff based on their school's weakest strand (e.g., scaffolding) and pair with schools that identified this area as a strength - share strategies, lessons learned, and practical solutions.
 7. Analyse responses from audits & organise specific training on this aspect e.g. metacognition.

QA the Implementation Plans:

- check that the plans' active ingredients are manageable and directly aligned with the overarching issues highlighted for SEND in each school's context.
 - Ensure Plans have short, medium, and long-term outcomes,
 - Check CPD will be monitored and delivered.
 - Feedback to staff.
8. Consider launching with Headteachers - direction by the Trust to dedicate a substantial portion of their CPD time for the year to the SENDing Students Soaring strategy?

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Embedded support

1. Develop an offer of professional development for TAs – consider the Level 3 and Level 5 Apprenticeship routes.
2. Include in teacher development sessions reflection time about how TAs can be effectively deployed.
3. Consider setting up a Professional Development Group to understand how a rigorous approach to Preparation for Adulthood can raise expectations and develop staff understanding of explicit teaching towards independence on PfA outcomes.

Focused specialist interventions

1. Review and quality assure each school's Accessibility statement alongside their SEND Information Report and MAT SEND Policy.
2. Host training event for SENCOs to help them to understand importance of correct identification of need.
3. Ensure that schools have checked their SEND Register and correctly inputted student need into their MIS system in advance of the January Census.
4. Raise SENCO awareness of the support systems in place in the MAT e.g., Professional Advocates who can be commissioned to undertake project based peer to peer support & 'Needs' Nurturers' available for more immediate advice and guidance.
5. Undertake MAT wide review of data re. individual needs and 4 Broad Areas of Need to identify growth areas in order to plan future CPD.
6. Offer Level 5 Specialist TA apprenticeship course.

CPD Timeline for SENDIng Students Soaring – Year plan

January: Headteachers' Conference (senior MAT Leads & Headteacher – ½ day)

- Introduced the strategy, its purpose, and key strands.
- Secured agreement from headteachers to allocate substantial CPD time for the initiative

February – April: Collaborative Planning (Trust Leads & Headteacher – 1 day)

- Trust colleagues analysed trust data, identified problems, and explored solutions around adaptive teaching practices and SEND leadership.

May: Launch HUB (Trust Lead & Headteacher – 2 hours)

- Hosted for all SENCOs and T&L leads to introduce the strategy and key dates.
- Launched the 5-a-Day staff audit.
- Scheduled meetings (May–June) to discuss barriers to learning for SEND students.



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Appendix I (continued)

June – July: Conferences

- Conference 1(1 day): SENCOs only. (Trust Lead & Headteacher + External Expert + SENCOs – 1 day)
 - Focus: SEND leadership and understanding NUTSHELLS.
- Conference 2 (2 days): SENCOs and T&L leads. ((Trust Lead & Headteacher + External Expert + SENCOs + T&L Lead- 1 day)
 - Focus: Challenges of SENCO roles, adaptive teaching, 5-a-Day strategies, and implementation planning.

June – September: Drop-in Clinics and Support (Trust Lead -ad hoc)

- Tailored guidance for refining implementation plans, resource preparation, and instructional coaching.

September: School Launch Official launch of SEND-focused CPD sessions, aligned with implementation plans.

October: First Evaluation

- In-school questionnaires evaluated CPD launch success.

October: HUB 1(Trust Lead & Headteacher + External Expert 2 hours)

- Focus: Short-term outcomes, QA processes, and metacognition strategies.

December: HUB 2(Trust Lead & Headteacher + rust MIS Lead 2 hours)

- Focus: Live data tracking, NUTSHELLS review, and Ofsted case study preparation.
- Monthly Newsletters (Since September):
- Includes best practices, SEND articles, questionnaires, and practical resources.

December: Implementation Plan Review

- Schools RAG-rate short-term outcomes.
- Analysis informs next steps for spring term priorities.

Resources to help:

[Teacher Handbook SEND - August 2024 071024.pdf](#) 

[Webinar: Leadership of SEND: Building a Culture of Collective Responsibility | Whole School SEND](#) 

[gary aubin the lone senco - Google Search](#) 

[Putting Evidence to Work – A School’s Guide to Implementation](#) 

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