

Labour's SEND "reform": an austerity-driven attack on vulnerable children

Tania Kent
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Britain's Labour government released its Schools White Paper on February 23, titled, "Every Child Achieving and Thriving". Central to the policies outlined is the section detailing Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Reform.

As with the government's other "reforms," the term has been turned on its head to describe a pro-market agenda—whether justifying further privatisation in the National Health Service (NHS) or the downgrading of the mail service—and this applies equally to the deepened erosion of public education.

The White Paper proposes an overhaul of the rights of children with SEND to access education over the next decade. Stripped of the jargon of "inclusion" and "equality for all," the measures will remove the statutory right of hundreds of thousands of children to receive necessary support, slash funding, and offload SEND provision onto cash-strapped schools and exhausted teachers.

Dismantling legal protections for SEND pupils

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson announced a new criterion for qualifying for SEND provision. The majority of SEND pupils will move onto individual support plans (ISPs), digital "passports" expected to replace EHCPs (Education Health Care Plans) for most children by 2029. EHCPs are legally enforceable plans outlining the provision SEND children require. The White Paper states these will be limited to only the "most complex needs" by 2035.

The White Paper does not explain how children deemed to have fewer complex needs will be assessed, raising well-founded concerns that this amounts to the rationing of support dictated by cost-cutting. ISPs have no legal enforceability and no guaranteed provision—only "expectations" that schools will implement them with little or no additional funding.

The additional £3.8 billion over three years will be spread across several services, including early intervention and specialist training.

The government aims to place the overwhelming majority of

SEND children into mainstream schools. This would reduce transport costs, where local authorities provide taxis and buses to specialist settings. The shift could also undermine specialist schools whose enrolment will fall.

Labour has pledged a £1.6 billion Inclusive Mainstream Fund, to be divided across every early years' setting, school and college over three years. SEND experts note this amounts to only "thousands of pounds per setting per year," sometimes equating to just a few hours of teacher time per week.

Government projections show around one in eight children currently receiving high-level support will be transitioned to weaker plans between 2030 and 2035.

For children with autism, ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) or any condition presenting "on a spectrum," the proposals suggest these pupils may no longer qualify for EHCP protection. Reassessments at transition points, such as leaving primary school, are included—but there is no workforce available to carry them out.

A crisis produced by austerity and privatisation

The White Paper trailed months of media reports claiming councils face bankruptcy due to SEND overspending. What these omit is that central government grants to local authorities have been cut by half since 2010, forcing a constant slash-and-burn of public provision and the sell-off of public assets to the private sector, which has leached billions through the contracting out of local services.

A survey published days before the White Paper found that of 87 councils responding, 69 warned they faced insolvency if required to repay SEND debts built up over years of overspending.

Local government minister Alison McGovern announced that councils would receive grants covering 90 percent of accumulated overspends to the end of the financial year, which she said was "projected to be worth over £5bn."

Overspends are forecast to reach £5 billion annually by 2028, while the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts cumulative

council deficits of £14 billion.

A major driver of this deficit is the placement of SEND pupils in private schools. Some 97 councils spent more than £3.7 billion on private SEND placements over the last three financial years.

Independent SEN schools charge around £61,500–£63,000 per pupil annually, compared with about £26,000 in state special schools. Some providers charge far more for complex or residential placements—up to £250,000–£350,000 per pupil.

The private sector now educates an estimated 130,000 SEND pupils, largely funded by councils. Despite Phillipson’s claim that private providers’ “gouging” will be “scrutinised,” privatisation will continue. All new schools—mainstream and special—will be built by private operators under academy or independent status, with no new state schools planned.

The government announced only £150 million in additional funding through the SEND and Alternative Provision Capital Fund to increase specialist school places and create specialist units in mainstream schools. This represents a tiny 0.12 percent of total UK education spend.

A Workforce Training Fund was also announced, but no details were provided on funding levels for training or professional development. The teaching recruitment crisis continues, with the promised 6,500 new teachers still unfilled and specialist staff shortages widespread.

Promises to expand specialist services such as speech and language therapy and mental health support are equally hollow. The notion that schools will have “Experts at Hand” is unrealistic after decades of shortages in these professions, leaving children waiting years for assessments. The £1.8 billion allocated is wholly inadequate, and training new professionals takes years.

Schools will also be required to produce legally binding Inclusion Strategies outlining how they will deliver evidence-based support for SEND pupils—further increasing workloads for teachers.

Parents’ rights will also be curtailed. Councils will gain powers to impose a shortlist of schools, and the right to appeal to tribunals will be restricted.

Rising needs and the fight for public education

Many core elements of the reforms have been postponed until the next parliament, as ministers attempt to defuse anger among parent campaigners who recognise the measures as austerity imposed on the most vulnerable. This follows Labour’s broader agenda of welfare cuts and measures aimed at forcing disabled people into jobs that do not exist.

Phillipson cited the achievement gap between SEND and non-SEND pupils. But this is the product of systematic cuts to

education budgets totalling around £60 billion in real terms over the past decade.

One in three children have special needs at some point in their schooling. More than half (51.6 percent) of pupils who fail to meet Key Stage 2 expectations in reading, writing and maths have been identified with special needs by the end of that stage.

In January 2025, 638,700 children and young people had an active EHCP—an increase of 10.8 percent from January 2024. Since the 2014 reforms introducing EHCPs, the number has doubled, including a 30 percent increase among children under five since 2023.

The rise is driven primarily by Autism Spectrum Disorders, Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, and Speech, Language and Communication Needs. Meanwhile, the number of pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties or Severe Learning Difficulties—those most likely to require specialist schools—has remained largely unchanged.

The increased demand for EHCPs has not developed in a vacuum. The criminal policy of placing profit over public health during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the thousands of children who lost a parent—around 2 million who suffer from Long COVID—worsening mental health and rising child poverty have had a devastating impact on children.

The education unions have been complicit in the systematic decline in education funding, the expansion of privatisation and the erosion of working conditions. They have repeatedly blocked strike mandates by teachers seeking to defend their conditions and oppose below-inflation pay settlements.

National Education Union (NEU) General Secretary Daniel Kebede responded to the government’s plans on SEND by accepting the entire framework as legitimate, stating “reforming SEND cannot be done on the cheap”. This is to maintain the fraud that the measures represent anything other than a cost-cutting exercise to demobilise opposition by parents and teachers.

The education unions have all “cautiously welcomed” the reforms announced by Phillipson, with the condition that they “don’t go far enough” and more funding is needed. They will not mobilise their membership for a properly funded education system, having promoted Labour as an alternative to more than a decade of austerity under the Conservatives.

The defence of education for all and decent wages and conditions for teachers can only happen through an independent rank-and-file opposition of teachers united with broader sections of workers against austerity, the attack on democratic rights and the subordination of all needs to the profit system.



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