# Autistic campaigner secures 10,000 signatures calling for mandatory neurodiversity training in UK schools



An autistic man's compelling call for mandatory neurodiversity training for teachers is gaining traction in the UK, with over 10,000 supporters backing his petition. Tom Howard, who lived through the challenges of navigating education as a neurodivergent student, seeks to ensure that educational environments become more inclusive and supportive for students with conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia. In explaining his motivation, Howard recounted the difficulties he faced at university, characterised by a lack of understanding and adequate adjustments for his needs, which left him feeling overwhelmed and unsupported.

The statistics surrounding neurodiversity in the UK are stark, with estimates suggesting that between 15 to 20% of young people are neurodivergent, as reported by the Children’s Society. Yet, alarming figures from the National Autistic Society reveal that only 14% of secondary school teachers have received substantial training on autism, while a staggering 70% of autistic students feel their teachers lack adequate understanding. This knowledge gap is concerning, as highlighted by Joey Nettleton Burrows, policy and public affairs manager at the National Autistic Society, who emphasised the necessity for educators to understand autism in order to provide effective support in classrooms.

The implications of this training go beyond mere classroom interaction; they touch upon the mental health and emotional wellbeing of neurodivergent students. Howard cautioned that the prevalent struggles faced by these students could lead to increased emotional distress and mental health issues. He stated, "Every teacher deserves the tools to recognise and respond to neurodivergence—and every student deserves to be understood." His lived experience, along with the legislative push for reform, underscores a broader societal recognition of the need for improved educational practices.

The campaign for mandatory neurodiversity training is not just a solitary endeavour. Previous evidence presented to the UK Parliament indicates that a significant majority of teachers feel unprepared to support neurodivergent students, with 58% admitting they lack confidence in managing such cases. Furthermore, neurodivergent children are disproportionately at risk of exclusion from school, with those who do not fit into the idealised educational norms facing far harsher disciplinary measures.

Howard’s petition aligns with broader calls for systemic change in the educational landscape. The Department for Education acknowledges the urgent need to “restore the confidence of families” within the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) framework. With a substantial investment in SEND services, the government is contemplating long-term reforms to ensure that all children receive the education they deserve. As part of this push, Howard's voice echoes the sentiments of many advocates who continue to push for a comprehensive framework that includes the mandatory training of teachers in neurodiversity.

Moreover, recent parliamentary debates have further highlighted the necessity of this initiative, with discussions emphasising the role educators must play in recognising and supporting neurodivergent conditions from a young age. These conversations signal a pivotal moment where existing methods may be re-evaluated in favour of approaches that encompass inclusivity and understanding, paving the way for a more equitable educational environment.

As support for Howard’s petition continues to swell, the hope for real change in how educational institutions handle neurodiversity remains a topic of national importance. Howard's determination reflects a collective aspiration: that through improved training and awareness, schools can become safe sanctuaries where every student’s unique needs are understood and met, ensuring they can achieve their fullest potential without the shadow of exclusion or misunderstanding.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8y6gnzjyvo), [[2]](https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/724432)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/724432), [[3]](https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136673/html/), [[4]](https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136185/html/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[5]](https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/myth-normal-child), [[6]](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/celebrating-neurodiversity-young-people)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8y6gnzjyvo), [[7]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-04-23/debates/D9A8C26F-0A50-4F7A-B109-ACCAC6DD72B2/NeurodivergentConditions%28ScreeningAndTeacherTraining%29)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8y6gnzjyvo), [[6]](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/celebrating-neurodiversity-young-people), [[7]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-04-23/debates/D9A8C26F-0A50-4F7A-B109-ACCAC6DD72B2/NeurodivergentConditions%28ScreeningAndTeacherTraining%29)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cp8y6gnzjyvo> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/724432> - This UK government petition, initiated by Tom Howard, calls for mandatory neurodiversity training for all education staff. It aims to tackle inaccessible education, improve inclusion for neurodivergent pupils, and reduce mental health risks through better understanding and support. The petition highlights that only 14% of secondary school teachers have received more than half a day's training on autism, and autistic pupils are twice as likely to be excluded. As of now, it has garnered over 1,000 signatures, with a goal of 10,000 to receive a government response.
3. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136673/html/> - This written evidence submitted to the UK Parliament emphasizes the necessity of substantive training for educators to support neurodiverse children effectively. It presents statistics such as 58% of UK teachers feeling unprepared to support students with autism and 31% lacking confidence in supporting students with neurodiverse conditions. The document advocates for training that reduces bullying, improves behavior, and increases engagement, leading to better academic and social outcomes for neurodiverse children.
4. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/136185/html/> - This submission to the UK Parliament discusses the challenges faced by neurodivergent children in mainstream education. It highlights that only 39% of teachers in mainstream schools received more than half a day of autism training in 2023, with just 14% for secondary school teachers. The document argues that teachers lack the specialist knowledge required to support neurodiverse children effectively and calls for increased investment in teacher training to meet these needs.
5. <https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/myth-normal-child> - An article from the British Psychological Society discussing the challenges neurodivergent children face in education. It notes that children who do not fit the normative 'ideal child' are disproportionately likely to be permanently excluded from school, with neurodivergent young people being three to six times more likely to face exclusion. The article emphasizes the need for educators to understand and support neurodiversity to prevent such exclusions.
6. <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/blogs/celebrating-neurodiversity-young-people> - A blog post by The Children's Society celebrating neurodiversity in young people. It estimates that 15-20% of the population are neurodivergent, yet many young people don't feel supported in schools or social settings. The article discusses the importance of embracing differences and making small changes in the classroom to create inclusive environments for neurodiverse students.
7. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2024-04-23/debates/D9A8C26F-0A50-4F7A-B109-ACCAC6DD72B2/NeurodivergentConditions%28ScreeningAndTeacherTraining%29> - A UK Parliament debate where Matt Hancock presents a bill to make provision about screening for neurodivergent conditions in primary schools and to make provision about teacher training relating to neurodivergent conditions. The bill aims to ensure that children with neurodivergent conditions receive the education they deserve and that teachers are properly trained to support these children.