# Disparities deepen as families spend thousands on SEND support in England



Research reveals stark inequalities in the way parents in England navigate the special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system, with some families spending thousands of pounds in pursuit of support for their children. A report by the Sutton Trust found that one in eight children in special schools have parents who have spent £5,000 or more on assessments linked to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). These plans legally detail the additional support a child requires and are crucial for accessing specialist education.

The disparities are striking: 65% of working-class families spent nothing on their child’s EHCP applications, while only 29% of middle-class families managed the same. Conversely, one in ten middle-class families spent over £5,000 on medical assessments, consultancy, and legal fees related to the process. Parents who invested these sums were far more likely to secure places in sought-after special schools and to challenge local authority decisions through tribunals, which mostly result in the successful award of an EHCP. Middle-class parents were eight percentage points more likely overall to obtain EHCPs compared to their working-class counterparts.

Such findings underline the systemic inequities faced by families in securing support. Children with SEND from disadvantaged backgrounds are doubly burdened: not only are they less likely to receive adequate support at school, but they also face lower educational outcomes. Despite making up 26% of schoolchildren, those eligible for free school meals represent 44% of children with EHCPs and 39% who receive additional support without EHCPs. This disproportionality reflects broader social inequalities that adversely affect educational inclusion and attainment.

Financial pressures on local authorities exacerbate the problem. Although funding for SEND pupils in England has increased by nearly 60% since 2015, local authorities collectively have amassed deficits around £3.3 billion this year alone, with projections indicating further rapid rises in spending needs. This funding shortfall risks the insolvency of councils and restricts their capacity to deliver consistent, equitable support.

Voices from the education sector stress the inadequacy of current resources. School leaders highlight delays in EHCP assessments and shortages in specialist staff such as speech and language therapists. Many families, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds, struggle to afford private assessments and legal challenges, effectively creating a two-tier system where access to support depends on parental means rather than children’s needs.

The government has acknowledged these issues amid plans to reform SEND provision. Education Minister Georgia Gould described the current system as one that has “failed” many children, promising earlier intervention measures, improved teacher training, and significant investment—£740 million earmarked to expand specialist school places. Despite earlier speculation that EHCPs might be abolished in forthcoming reforms, insiders have indicated that these plans will continue, signalling an intent to retain the legal framework while possibly improving its delivery.

Nevertheless, educators and campaigners warn that structural inequalities run deep and require more than procedural reforms. A University of Manchester study argues that disproportionality in SEND reflects entrenched societal and educational disparities, necessitating systemic change beyond adjustments to identification processes. Additionally, House of Lords reports have consistently pointed to significant gaps in educational attainment between pupils with SEND and their peers.

Meanwhile, the demand for special school places continues to outstrip supply, with the number of pupils in special schools rising sharply in recent years. Thousands of children remain on waiting lists, intensifying pressure across the system and exposing urgent needs for targeted funding and capacity expansion.

In sum, the SEND system in England is at a critical juncture. While legal provisions like EHCPs offer essential support frameworks, access to these is skewed by socioeconomic inequalities. Without decisive reform and investment, many children with SEND risk being left behind, their futures shaped not by their needs but by their parents’ resources and persistence. As the government moves forward with promised changes, the challenge will be to build a truly inclusive, well-resourced system that delivers equitable opportunities for all children with special educational needs.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps), [[3]](https://www.inkl.com/news/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5-000-on-ehcps), [[2]](https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/sutton-trust-reports-reveals-that-low-income-familes-are-facing-major-inequalities-to-access-send-support/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps), [[3]](https://www.inkl.com/news/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5-000-on-ehcps)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps), [[5]](https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/disproportionality-in-special-needs-education-in-england), [[2]](https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/sutton-trust-reports-reveals-that-low-income-familes-are-facing-major-inequalities-to-access-send-support/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[4]](https://ifs.org.uk/news/system-funding-special-educational-needs-broken), [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps), [[2]](https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/sutton-trust-reports-reveals-that-low-income-familes-are-facing-major-inequalities-to-access-send-support/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps)
* Paragraph 7 – [[5]](https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/disproportionality-in-special-needs-education-in-england), [[6]](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldeqact/117/11714.htm)
* Paragraph 8 – [[7]](https://phys.org/news/2024-10-crisis-special-provision-situation-uk.html)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps), [[2]](https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/sutton-trust-reports-reveals-that-low-income-familes-are-facing-major-inequalities-to-access-send-support/), [[4]](https://ifs.org.uk/news/system-funding-special-educational-needs-broken)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/oct/16/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5000-on-ehcps> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.fenews.co.uk/fe-voices/sutton-trust-reports-reveals-that-low-income-familes-are-facing-major-inequalities-to-access-send-support/> - The Sutton Trust's 'Double Disadvantage' report highlights significant disparities in access to special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) support between low-income and middle-class families. It reveals that 65% of working-class families spent nothing on their child's Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) application, compared to 29% of middle-class families. Additionally, 12% of parents with children in special schools had spent over £5,000 on the EHCP application process, including medical assessments and legal advice, underscoring the financial barriers in securing adequate support for SEND children.
3. <https://www.inkl.com/news/some-parents-of-special-school-pupils-in-england-spending-5-000-on-ehcps> - Research by the Sutton Trust indicates that 12% of parents with children in special schools have spent £5,000 or more on their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) applications, compared to just 1% of those in mainstream schools. The study also found that 65% of working-class families spent nothing on their child's EHCP application, while only 29% of middle-class families did the same. This disparity highlights the inequalities in accessing SEND support based on socioeconomic status.
4. <https://ifs.org.uk/news/system-funding-special-educational-needs-broken> - The Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that funding for pupils with special educational needs in England increased by 59% (£4 billion) between 2015 and 2024. Despite this, local authorities have accumulated deficits estimated at £3.3 billion this year, with forecasts indicating a further £2–3 billion increase in annual spending by 2027. The report calls for reforms to the system to prevent local authority bankruptcies and ensure sustainable support for SEND pupils.
5. <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/publications/disproportionality-in-special-needs-education-in-england> - A study by the University of Manchester examines disproportionality in special needs education in England. It argues that the overrepresentation of certain social groups in the special needs system reflects broader educational and social inequalities. The research suggests that addressing these disparities requires a focus on the systemic issues contributing to disproportionality, rather than solely on the misidentification of students as having disabilities.
6. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldeqact/117/11714.htm> - A House of Lords report on the impact of the Equality Act 2010 on disabled people highlights significant educational inequalities. In 2014, 17.9% of pupils in England had special educational needs (SEN), with only 23.4% achieving at least five A\*–C GCSEs compared to 70.4% of those without SEN. The report underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these disparities and improve outcomes for disabled students.
7. <https://phys.org/news/2024-10-crisis-special-provision-situation-uk.html> - An article on Phys.org discusses the crisis in special educational needs provision across the UK and Ireland. In England, there has been a 47% increase in the number of pupils at special schools from 2015 to 2023, yet as of May 2024, 4,407 children were waiting for school places in specialist provision. The article highlights the strain on the system and the urgent need for funding and reform to meet the growing demand for SEND support.