# Government's flawed SEN integration risks overwhelming classrooms and shortchanging children



In the heart of west London, All Saints Catholic College is championing a classroom model that, while seemingly innovative, exposes the systemic failures of a government more committed to bureaucratic labels than effective solutions. The Bethlehem unit, designed for just eight pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), epitomizes the government's misguided push towards integrating children with specific educational needs into mainstream schools—an approach that risks diluting standards and overburdening already stretched classrooms.

Supported by the state's misguided belief that individualised learning can be achieved through small specialist units within mainstream schools, the Bethlehem model offers a temporary façade of progress. Yet, this approach glosses over the deeper issue: the chaotic underfunding and poor resource allocation plaguing our SEN system. While some schools like All Saints put on a brave face, the reality is that with record numbers of children with EHCPs—nearly half a million—local authorities are drowning in a £5 billion shortfall. Despite this, ministers continue to promote policies that push children, particularly those with complex needs, into mainstream environments ill-equipped to support them.

This reliance on private providers, where costs soar to nearly three times higher than in state-funded schools—averaging £62,000 a year per pupil—reveals a government disillusioned with its own failed policies. The increasing dependence on costly private placements underscores systemic underfunding and the inability of the public sector to meet demand. Parents caught in this setup face a postcode lottery: inconsistent access, delays in receiving support, and schools stretched to breaking point, further fueling dissatisfaction and burnout among teachers tasked with managing ever more complex needs.

While Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson talks about “thinking differently,” little tangible action has been taken to address the crumbling foundation of SEN funding and resources. The government’s focus on integrating SEND into mainstream education—rather than fixing the root problems—is a symptomatic failure that will only serve to complicate matters further. The proposed reforms, including plans to phase out traditional EHCPs in favor of broader integration, risk ignoring the diversity of needs unless backed by substantial investment and targeted support.

The Bethlehem unit is, at best, a symbol of what could be achieved with proper backing—an example of how ambitious, specialist education can coexist within mainstream settings. But it is also a stark reminder that without a fundamental overhaul of the current system, children with special needs will continue to be shortchanged. Until the government recognizes that real change requires cutting through the red tape and providing adequate funding, these piecemeal initiatives will fail to deliver lasting improvements. The hope for reform lies in honest assessment, not in superficial models that merely paper over a crumbling system.

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jul/11/high-aspirations-the-school-that-embodies-labours-hopes-for-special-needs> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jul/11/high-aspirations-the-school-that-embodies-labours-hopes-for-special-needs> - An article from The Guardian discusses All Saints Catholic College in west London, which has established the Bethlehem unit, a specialist resource provision within a mainstream secondary school. This unit caters to eight pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), aiming to integrate students with special needs into the broader school community. The piece highlights the challenges in England's special needs education system, including rising numbers of EHCPs and financial strains on local authorities.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/a79b6d89-8a6c-42a2-9d92-8b9e52e0879c> - A Financial Times report reveals that 20% of children in England require special needs support in schools, with over 5% holding EHCPs. The number of EHCPs has risen by 11% this year to a record 482,640, doubling in the past decade. This surge has significantly strained council budgets, with an estimated £5 billion shortfall. Experts attribute the increase to better identification of conditions like autism and ADHD, rather than a rise in actual incidence.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/fb3dabfc-2ee1-4a76-8082-37fe7d80620c> - The Financial Times reports that revenues at privately run special needs schools in England have nearly doubled since 2019. This surge is due to local authorities increasingly relying on private providers to meet the growing demand for specialist education. The number of children requiring special educational needs support has more than doubled over the past decade to 576,000, prompting councils to turn to private institutions. The cost of a private SEN place averages £62,000 annually, compared to £24,000 in the public sector.
5. <https://news.sky.com/story/england-s-special-educational-needs-system-is-a-postcode-lottery-in-urgent-need-of-funding-and-reform-say-mps-13289097> - Sky News reports that England's special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) system is facing a crisis, with MPs describing it as a 'postcode lottery' in urgent need of funding and reform. Local authority spending on SEND has consistently outstripped government funding, leading to substantial deficits in council budgets. The Public Accounts Committee's report highlights serious issues with the current standard of SEND services available in different parts of the country, with only half of education, health and care plans for high support needs children and young people issued within the legal 20-week limit.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/d8d9323a-450f-47b5-acf9-105959837259> - A report from the National Audit Office (NAO) has concluded that England's system for supporting children with special educational needs (SEN) is financially unsustainable. Despite increased funding over the past decade, the number of children requiring additional support has more than doubled, leading to significant financial deficits. The NAO found that the Department for Education's improvement plan had failed to address the situation adequately. Demand has surpassed government-funded school places, forcing councils to utilize costly private institutions, further straining budgets. The watchdog predicted a £3.4 billion funding gap by 2027-28.
7. <https://chartered.college/news-blogs/the-send-crisis-and-teacher-retention-understanding-the-impact-and-solutions/> - An article from the Chartered College of Teaching discusses the impact of the SEND crisis on teacher retention. The Local Government Association estimated a multi-million-pound deficit in SEND provision, with mainstream schools often unable to afford specialist staff or tailored resources, leading to unmet needs. The proportion of students with SEND has steadily increased, with over 1.5 million students (around 17%) recorded as having SEND in England as of 2024. This has left teachers and school leaders feeling ill-equipped and unsupported to meet complex SEND needs, contributing to teacher attrition and increased workload.