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Leadership that promotes the achievement of students with special educational needs and disabilities: support pack

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Resource

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Introduction

This support pack is designed for senior leaders in schools. Its purpose is to promote reflection and discussion about how the school understands the issue of special educational needs and disabilities (SEN/D) and how the leadership can develop strategies to promote the achievement of pupils identified with SEN/D. The framework used is based on the findings of research undertaken by the University of Manchester to explore leadership that promotes the achievement of pupils identified with SEN/D. The support pack is structured in two sections:

Section 1: Conceptualising leadership for SEN/D

Leadership promoting the achievement of students identified as having SEN/D can be thought of as leadership that promotes a whole-school approach to the task or as the responsibility of a few specialists targeting a small and discrete group of students, in effect a bolt-on enterprise to the work of the school. This section presents a framework for understanding leadership for SEN/D consisting of five key dimensions of: values; approaches to teaching and learning; resources for support; specialist leadership roles; and approach to integrated services. It can be used as a framework for analysing the approaches in your school and thinking about strategies for moving them further towards the whole-school model identified in the left-hand side of Table 1.

Section 2: Reflecting on leadership for SEN/D

The second section draws on the framework to present a series of questions for reflection and discussion. These questions are designed to promote ideas that lead to the improvement of the leadership arrangements for tackling SEN/D issues.

Conceptualising leadership for SEN/D

Leadership promoting the achievement of students identified as having SEN/D can be thought of as leadership that promotes a whole-school approach to the task or as the responsibility of a few specialists targeting a small and discrete group of students, in effect a bolt-on enterprise to the work of the school. Table 1 breaks down leadership for SEN/D into five dimensions and within these dimensions indicates the types of approach that might be considered to be whole school, or alternatively, bolted-on practice. It can be used as a framework for analysing the approaches in your school and thinking about strategies for moving them further towards the whole-school model identified in the left-hand side of Table 1.

Table 1: Whole school vs bolt-on approaches to promoting the achievement of SEN/D identified students

Conceptualisation: task of SEN/D viewed as whole school	Conceptualisation: task of SEN/D viewed as the preserve of specialists
Values: a shared commitment to inclusion	Values: individual values and the emergence of subcultures
Approaches to teaching and learning: collaborative, problem-solving approaches used to support the achievement of all students	Approaches to teaching and learning: individual, problem-solving approaches used to support the achievement of SEN/D students
Resources for support: potentially available to all pupils and used for flexible provision and individual planning	Resources for support: used to strengthen discrete SEN/D provision
Specialist leadership roles: highly distributed, with staff taking on formal and informal leadership activities to support the learning of all students	Specialist leadership roles: less distributed, with few staff taking on formal and informal leadership activities to support the learning of SEN/D students
Approaches to integrated services: services beyond the school are used to enhance the flexibility of provision	Approaches to integrated services: problems are referred to specialist services outside the school

Reflecting on leadership for SEN/D

This section of the support pack is designed to promote reflection and discussion around how your school understands the nature of working with SEN/D issues and what might be done to improve the arrangements for tackling them. The framework for understanding leadership for SEN/D consists of five key dimensions of: values; approaches to teaching and learning; resources for support; specialist leadership roles; and approaches to integrated services. We take each of the five dimensions in turn.

Values

Within schools that are successful in promoting the achievement of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, there is a strong sense of purpose and shared values. Often this is described as a commitment to inclusion, which can mean:

- being open to working with any child or young person
- sticking with children and young people whatever challenges they may present
- finding ways of meeting the individual needs of all children and young people ('Everyone getting what they need' rather than 'Everyone doing or getting the same')
- recognising the gifts and talents of all children and young people
- valuing different gifts and talents equally

This commitment to inclusion often develops over many years with leadership from the top. However, middle leaders also play an important part in promoting values.

Schools wishing to embed a commitment to inclusion need to have ways of promoting shared values. Possible strategies include:

- articulating values in formal meetings with pupils, staff, parents and governors
- living the values in informal interactions and when helping to problem-solve particular issues for children and young people
- appointing staff who identify with the values promoted by the school

Think about your school...

Before deciding on the steps you might need to take to embed a commitment to inclusion, you need to understand the current situation in your school. The following questions are a starting-point for discussion:

- Do leaders have a shared understanding of what is meant by a commitment to inclusion? Is it possible to identify some key values?
- Is there a widespread commitment to inclusion in the school or not? How do you know? Where are you unsure about this commitment?
- Do leaders create opportunities to make the school's commitment to inclusion explicit?
- Do leaders model their commitment to inclusion? How?

How will you move your school?

Some prompts for action planning:

- Do you need to find out if there are inclusive values that are shared in the school? If so, how will you do this?
- Are there contexts in which you think there is a particular need to build consensus around some shared values? Who are the key people to lead this process? How will they do this?
- Can you identify any people to whom leaders need to make the school's commitment to inclusion clearer? What would you want to say to these people? How would you go about signalling the commitment?

Schools that are successful in promoting the achievement of pupils with SEN/D:

- base their approaches on an analysis of the context in which they are working
- have high expectations of all children and young people
- develop collaborative approaches to enable all pupils to access the curriculum

Understanding your context

The following examples are based on context analyses carried out by real schools that were part of the project [Promoting the achievement of students with SEN/D](#):

Example 1

This school is a large primary school that is additionally resourced to take 21 children with autistic-spectrum disorder (ASD). In recent years there have been some changes in its population, in part because it is now drawing pupils from a wider area than it used to, in part because of changes in the immediate community served by the school, and in part because the school is admitting children with ASD with increasingly significant needs. In order to be able to respond to the diverse and changing population, the school has highly developed systems for identifying individual support needs and is committed to finding solutions to new challenges. There is a willingness to adapt systems and approaches, even where this makes significant demands on resources. Adaptations might include changes to the physical environment of the school, differentiation in the delivery of the curriculum and modifications to the school's behaviour policy.

Example 2

This primary school serves an area with a high degree of social disadvantage. The percentage of pupils with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is above average and the profile of the population has not changed much over time. In this school special educational needs and disabilities are viewed as part of a continuum of need in the school which is related to children's social background. Approaches to SEN/D therefore overlap to a significant extent with more general strategies for promoting achievement. For example, there has been a whole-school process of curriculum development based on the principle that the children coming into the school need to develop social and communication skills before they can learn.

This is a response to the perception that children have limited opportunities at home to develop these skills. Consequently, there has been a considerable focus on developing a practical and play-based curriculum in the early years, and throughout the school teachers frequently make use of collaborative activities and role-play.

Think about your school...

- Do leaders base their approaches to SEN/D on an analysis of the school context?
- Is there a common analysis in the school? If so, what is it?
- To what extent do you think any common analysis is understood beyond the senior leadership team?
- What is the evidence for this analysis? What data does it draw on?

Expectations for achievement

“Teachers teach well – not strictly but kindly, with fun so children enjoy their work. Teachers push you to your full potential”.

Year 6 pupil

In schools that were part of the [Promoting the achievement of students with SEN/D](#) project, all staff had high expectations of all pupils. High expectations were clearly communicated to all staff and pupils by school leaders.

Academic achievement is supported when schools create opportunities for pupils with diverse characteristics to access the curriculum.

Example 3

A secondary school in Birmingham has developed a whole-school lesson plan template for differentiating the curriculum. In addition, a designated teaching assistant works with each subject teaching team to plan lessons with all members of staff. In this way, pupils with identified SEN/D are catered for as part of the school population.

Promoting achievement includes the primary aim of supporting all children and young people to attain academically. However, other outcomes are also important, for example, social and emotional wellbeing. These outcomes have specific importance for some groups of pupils, including children and young people on the autistic spectrum. However, they are important outcomes for all pupils, not only in their own right, but also because they seem to be mediating factors in attainment. Promoting social skills and wellbeing is therefore likely to be a key strategy for promoting the attainment of all pupils and for preventing difficulties with learning.

Think about your school...

- How is achievement understood by leaders? What outcomes are important?
- To what extent do all pupils have opportunities to achieve these outcomes?
- How are expectations for achievement communicated by leaders?
- To what extent are these expectations shared by all staff and pupils? How do you know?

Collaborative approaches

There are many people who have a role in supporting the achievement of pupils with SEN/D. They include teachers, support assistants, parents and pupils themselves. All these people can contribute insights about particular situations or more general provision in schools. Opportunities for collaboration help to ensure that the best use is made of these different insights. The more opportunities there are to work in collaborative ways, the more likely it is that provision for SEN/D is viewed as a whole-school concern rather than the preserve of a small number of experts.

Think about your school...

- Who has a voice in making decisions about SEN/D provision? In what contexts?
- Whose voice carries most weight? How do you know?
- Whose voice carries least weight? How do you know?

How will you move your school?

Some prompts for action-planning:

- Do you need to develop a common analysis of the context for SEN/D in your school? How will you do this? What sources of information will you draw on?
- Do you need to develop shared expectations for achievement in the school? Are there any contexts in which you think there is a particular need to develop ways for all pupils to access the curriculum? Who are the key people to lead this process? How will they do this?

- Do you need to find out more about the opportunities for collaboration that exist in the school? How will you build on the opportunities that currently exist? Are there any voices that need to be heard more strongly?

Resources for support

Schools need access to resources for support in order to be able to provide good-quality teaching and learning for all pupils. Leaders vary in the extent to which they are satisfied that they have access to sufficient resources for this purpose. However, a key task for them is maximising the resources that are available to meet support needs in their school.

Flexibility

Rigid systems and structures are likely to be inefficient. Flexible systems allow provision to be matched to the needs of individual pupils. For example, pupils may need different combinations of unsupported class placement, supported class placement and small-group or one-to-one teaching outside the class. Pupils' support needs are unlikely to remain static, so the mix of provision for any individual is likely to change over time.

Think about your school...

- How many different teaching and learning contexts can you identify in your school?
- Are these contexts linked to particular forms of support? If so, what are they?
- On what basis are pupils assigned to different contexts?
- What systems are there for reviewing individual support needs and how are they acted on?

Investing in support staff

Support assistants play an important role in flexible support systems, working across the range of teaching and learning and other support contexts in schools. This means thinking carefully about the ways in which they are allocated to groups and work with the pupils in such groups.

Schools that are successful in promoting the achievement of pupils with SEN/D also invest in training and development for support staff.

This might include:

- providing opportunities for teachers and support assistants to work together to develop approaches to teaching and learning
- helping support assistants to develop particular areas of expertise
- training support assistants to manage particular systems

Think about your school...

- What is the rationale for the way that support assistants are allocated to groups?
- How are support assistants expected to work with pupils?
- What professional development opportunities are there in your school for support assistants?
- To what extent is training and expertise shared and disseminated?

Individual planning

Within a flexible system, provision for individual pupils needs to be planned carefully. Well-developed record-keeping and tracking systems help with the identification of support needs.

Example 4

At a primary school in the north west, all children's progress is monitored by progress leaders (for the Foundation Stage, Years 1/2, Years 3/4 and Years 5/6) and discussed by the leadership team at half-termly intervals. Where there are concerns about a child's progress, he or she may be given a personal learning intervention plan (PLIP). This is designed to support effective early intervention in pupils' difficulties. Individual targets (broken down into four-weekly targets) are then set and short interventions are planned on a weekly basis. The special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) has overall responsibility for monitoring PLIPs and specific responsibility for monitoring upper-school PLIPs. The middle school and Foundation Stage leaders assist her. Children with PLIPs may or may not have identified SEN/D and the system runs alongside SEN/D systems for reviewing the progress of children with identified needs.

Good communication supports effective planning for individuals. In small schools this may be relatively informal. In larger schools there need to be more formal systems for sharing information.

Approaches might include:

- updating SEN/D information regularly and disseminating it to all staff
- encouraging teachers and support staff to use individual education plans (IEPs) as working documents
- providing pupils with information about their support needs to carry with them
- holding formal meetings between SEN/D specialists and other staff

Think about your school...

- What approaches are there for identifying support needs in your school? To what extent do they lead to an accurate understanding of individual needs?
- How effective are they in supporting early intervention and individual planning?

Collaboration between schools

There are sometimes opportunities for schools to pool resources to enhance the level, quality and flexibility of support. Partnerships between mainstream and special schools can also enhance the support available to pupils.

Example 5

In County Durham a proportion of resources for SEN/D is managed through clusters made up of secondary schools and their feeder primaries. Headteachers of all the schools in the cluster meet once every half term, when SEN/D issues are discussed. Common priorities are decided and funded, based on a budget that is delegated by the local authority. This means that resources can be shared. Resources funded in this way include: a speech and language technician working across schools; a parent support worker working across schools; and a literacy support programme (Lexia) used across schools. Working collaboratively has meant that schools have had to overcome fears about taking on some responsibilities that have been held previously by the local authority, but it has proved to be, in the headteacher's words, a very democratic way of working.

Think about your school...

- To what extent do you exploit opportunities for collaborating with other schools as a way of maximising resources for support?

How will you move your school?

Some prompts for action-planning:

- Do you need to find out more about the ways that resources for support are used in your school? If so, how will you do this?
- Are you aware of any particular rigidities in the system? If so, how will you address these?
- Is there a need for a review of the way that resources for support are used in your school? If so, what will be the aims of this process? Who are the key people to lead it? Who else needs to be involved?

Specialist leadership roles

There are some specific tasks that need to be carried out if leadership for SEN/D is to be effective. However, the particular arrangements for carrying out these tasks vary from school to school.

Role of the SENCO

Many schools appoint a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) who has particular responsibility for SEN/D and carries out many of the statutory duties related to SEN/D provision. In some schools the SENCO may have a relatively discrete leadership role and be responsible for SEN/D provision that is largely separate from the work of the rest of the school. However, the SENCO can be linked into wider systems, for example by being a member of the senior leadership team or working closely with other leaders. This is an indication that the school recognises SEN/D as a whole-school issue and provides the SENCO with opportunities to influence approaches to teaching, learning and support more generally. The SENCO's wider role may include:

- contributing to decisions about the deployment of school resources for support
- liaising with subject areas over approaches to teaching, learning and support
- helping to lead professional development processes for all teachers and support staff

- acting as a consultant for other staff on approaches to SEN/D
- ensuring that information about support needs is disseminated widely in the school

Think about your school...

- Is there a SENCO in your school? If so, what tasks does he/she carry out?
- Which members of staff work closely with him/her? In what ways?

Distributed leadership

SEN/D provision is strengthened where the capacity to provide SEN/D leadership is distributed throughout the school.

Example 6

A large secondary school in London has a curriculum support team made up of seven members of staff and led by the SENCO, which is responsible for leading approaches to SEN/D in the school. The role of the team is to work across the school to make sure that there is a high level of awareness about the diverse support needs in the school and a strong commitment to personalising provision for all pupils.

The team has led a transformation in the approach to SEN/D in the school, as a member of the curriculum support team explains:

“When I first started here about seven years ago you would hear kids around school referring to this department as dealing with ‘SEN heads’ but as the years have gone on that type of comment and mentality has all but disappeared. One of the most significant changes there was changing our name to ‘curriculum support’ which suggests something slightly different and we’re no longer seen as only dealing with pupils with SEN. When we go into the classroom we work with every single child in there so if a child has dyslexic needs we’ll obviously focus our attention on him initially but then we’ll move around to ensure every child has some sort of input... and then the one who we might be specifically there for isn’t the focus of attention and stigmatised because of it.”

Distributed leadership for SEN/D also helps with succession planning because schools can grow their own senior leaders. In its widest sense, distributed leadership involves all staff in the school viewing the responsibility for SEN/D as an integral part of their role.

Think about your school...

- Who would you describe as having leadership responsibility for SEN/D?
- What tasks are important? Who carries them out?

SEN/D and vulnerability

Children and young people who need support in school may also be experiencing difficulties in other contexts, for example, within their family. Outreach workers, homeschool liaison workers or educational social workers can help to co-ordinate support in different contexts and facilitate homeschool communication where SEN/D is part of a complex set of support needs. More generally, leaders at all levels need to ensure that holistic approaches are embedded in whole-school approaches to support.

Example 7

At a secondary school in the Midlands, the leadership structure includes the SENCO, who is an assistant headteacher and sits on the leadership team. Supporting the SENCO is a team of workers who are based in the school, including the home-school links worker, who was formerly with the youth offending team (YOT), and has links with a network of agencies, including a working relationship with the police (joint visits are part of one police officer's work schedule). The school also employs a full-time educational social worker whose role is not only to work with families to improve attendance but also to help the SENCO when arranging statement and transition reviews.

Think about your school...

- Who is responsible for co-ordinating support in different contexts? Who do they work with? What tasks are involved?

How will you move your school?

Some prompts for action-planning:

- Do you need to reconfigure of leadership arrangements in your school to improve SEN/D provision?

- Who needs to be involved in thinking about new arrangements?
- How can you ensure that responsibility for SEN/D is shared in the school?
- Do you need to find ways of embedding holistic approaches to support in your school? How will you do this?

Approaches to integrated services

Leaders that are successful in promoting achievement for pupils with SEN/D are committed to working in partnership with other services to enhance the flexibility of the provision in their school. Partnership working can make demands on school resources and skills and it takes time and commitment to develop productive relationships.

Integrated approaches work well when:

- external services are easily accessible and respond quickly to requests for help (co-located provision can aid this)
- schools and external services share responsibility for pupils, and staff work closely together
- some specialist services are delivered in the school environment rather than clinical settings
- services work with families in addition to individual pupils

Think about your school...

- Which external services does the school work with? How? Who liaises with them?
- Are there any difficulties in working with external services? What are they?

How will you move your school?

Some prompts for action-planning:

- How can leaders help to ensure that the school and the external services it works with share clear aims and that roles and responsibilities are clearly understood?
- How can the school ensure that families are partners in interventions involving external services?
- Can you identify any services with which you would like the school to work more closely? How will this be achieved?

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