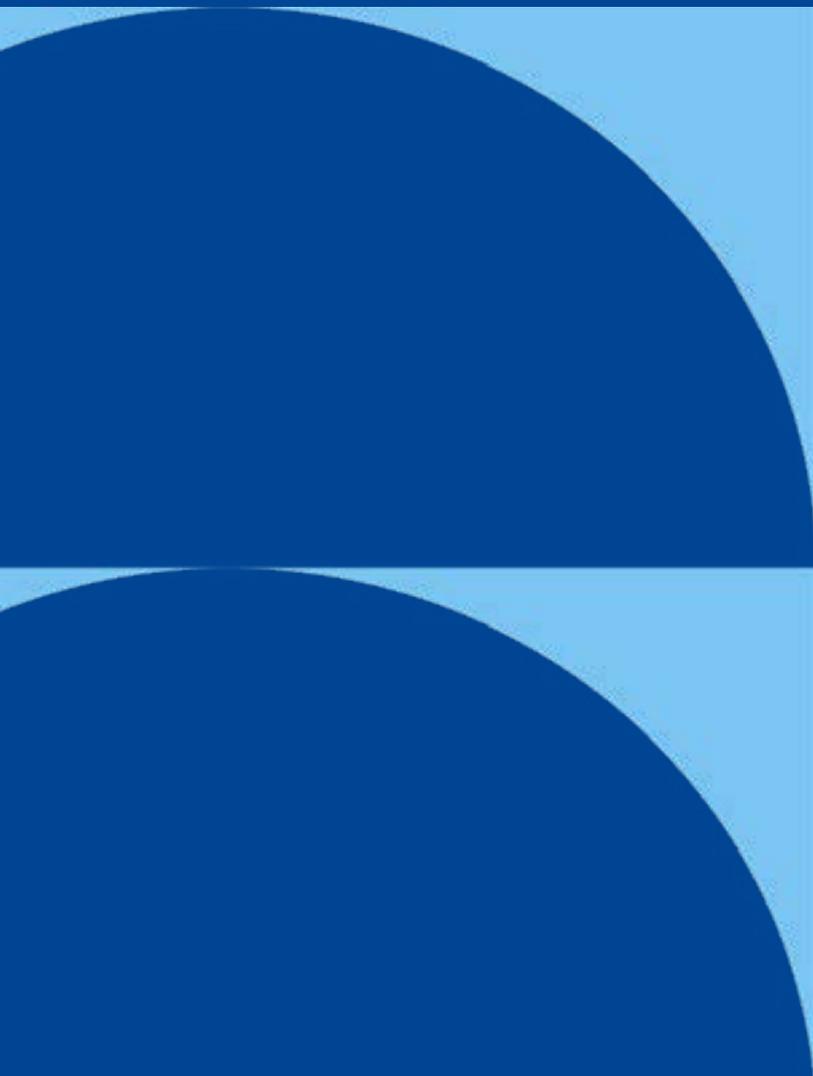


Charlotte O'Regan,  
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March 2026



# Selective Inclusion

The interplay of SEND and  
disadvantage in school admissions





## About the Sutton Trust

The Sutton Trust is the UK's leading social mobility charity. Our programmes empower young people to access life-changing opportunities, and our research influences national change to deliver a fairer future.

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# Key findings

- This report builds on previous Sutton Trust research on the role of socio-economic background in school admissions to look at how intertwined this is with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND). It shows that schools under-representing one group also tend to under-represent the other, and that under-representation of pupils with SEND at high performing schools is entirely driven by under-representing pupils with SEND who are also in low-income households.
- Secondary schools with higher FSM rates tend to have higher SEND rates. This relationship is stronger when considering pupils receiving SEN Support than pupils with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs).
- Local authorities with higher FSM rates also tend to have higher rates of pupils receiving SEN Support but not higher rates of children with EHCPs.
- Reflecting previous Sutton Trust research, high performing state comprehensives continue to have a lower proportion of FSM-eligible pupils than their local catchment. The top 500 schools by Progress 8 take 5.1 percentage points fewer FSM eligible pupils than live in their catchment areas. This gap grows to -6.1pp for the top 500 schools for English and maths passes at GCSE.
- Top mainstream secondary schools also have a lower proportion of pupils receiving SEN Support than their local catchment area. The top 500 schools by Progress 8 have an average SEND rate of 14.8%, compared to 17.6% at the average comprehensive, and 1.1 percentage points fewer than the rate in the catchment areas of those schools. This gap is bigger - 1.7pp - for top schools by English and maths passes. However, the scale of these gaps is lower compared to FSM gaps.
- These gaps only apply to SEND pupils without EHCPs. For those with EHCPs, top schools take 3%, which is the same as the average comprehensive, and matches the rate that live in their catchments.

- These gaps are also driven by disadvantage. Non-FSM pupils receiving SEN Support are not under-represented at top schools compared to catchment areas. However, pupils who are both eligible for free school meals and receiving SEN Support are under-represented. Top schools for Progress 8 have 3.6% of pupils meeting this definition, compared to 4.9% in their catchment areas, and 5.6% in the average school. The gap is even bigger at top schools for English and maths, who take in 2.8% compared to 4.4% in their catchments.
- As a result, top schools that are less representative in terms of disadvantage tend to also be less representative in terms of SEND. For example, 71% of the top 500 schools for Progress 8 that take in fewer FSM pupils than their local area also take in fewer pupils with SEND.
- Our survey of over 2,000 school leaders found that reputational differences play a key role in school admissions. The most commonly reported reasons for differing SEND cohorts amongst schools in their area were different reputations for quality of SEND provision (63%) and different reputations for inclusivity (55%).
- However, 41% of senior leaders reported some schools in their area actively discouraged applications from pupils with SEND. This was 46% for primary leaders and 32% for secondary.
- Responses also differed by school intake. Half (50%) of school leaders in schools with the highest level of SEND reported that some schools actively discourage applications from pupils with SEND, compared to just a third (33%) of school leaders with the lowest levels of SEND. There was a similar pattern for levels of disadvantage, with 44% of those in the most deprived schools reporting this, compared to 33% in the least.
- Almost a third (32%) of senior leaders felt different approaches to behaviour may have contributed to different intakes of pupils with SEND.
- The government has recently announced an intention for more children with SEND to be educated in mainstream schools. Two-thirds of senior leaders (66%) felt more teachers or TAs would be most helpful in helping their school to educate more students with SEND.

- 58% of senior leaders reported that more specialist support such as speech and language support would help them to educate more pupils with SEND. Leaders in schools with the lowest levels of SEND were most likely to report this.
- Over a quarter (28%) of respondents felt that better training on SEND and inclusion would help them educate more pupils with SEND.
- School leaders in the schools with the highest levels of disadvantage and pupils with SEND were most likely to want to see greater recognition of inclusion in Ofsted inspections or school league tables.

# Ways forward

- The government must **recognise the importance of ‘Double Disadvantage’** in the design and delivery of its proposed SEND reforms. This should start with acknowledging and addressing the relationship between socio-economic background and SEND in school admissions.
- While the government aspires to have more children with SEND educated in mainstream schools, some schools are educating fewer pupils with SEND than we might expect given their catchment. SEND reform should **support schools that have further to travel** to meet the aspirations set out in the White Paper.
- While there is some senior leader appetite for local partnerships and other aspects of the government’s reforms, our polling is clear that if the government wants schools to educate more pupils with SEND in mainstream schools, **a focus on increasing school staffing is essential**. Senior leaders also felt specialist support would be key to helping them educate more pupils with SEND. The government should **ensure senior leaders and teachers are able to shape the design and delivery of ‘Experts at Hand’**, which is an important part of increasing mainstream schools’ SEND capacity.
- The Sutton Trust has previously recommended that schools should carry out an annual fair access review to assess whether they are serving the full socio-economic range of their community. This **review should be extended to consider children with SEND**.
- This research shows the extent to which socio-economic disadvantage is affecting the SEND inclusion agenda. **Narrowing gaps in socio-economic intake between schools would likely lead to greater SEND intake** among schools that currently have lower levels of SEND. Current Sutton Trust recommendations for schools are available [here](#), and we will be launching our Admissions Hub with more detailed guidance and resources later in Spring 2026.
- SEND is a large, aggregated category, and there are inconsistencies in identification between schools. This report highlights the **need for better, more consistent identification of SEND**, which the National Inclusion Standards will look to address.

# Introduction

There is widespread acceptance that SEND provision is in crisis but fierce debate surrounding ways forward. Greater demand is being placed on a system that is complex, notoriously difficult to navigate, and too often leaves young people without the support they need.

In October 2025, the Sutton Trust released [Double Disadvantage?](#), which examined the link between SEND and socio-economic disadvantage, finding that outcomes for students with SEND from poorer backgrounds tend to be worse than their wealthier counterparts. The report also exposed inequalities in access to SEND provision. Drawing on a survey of 4,000 parents, we found that middle-class parents found it easier to navigate the SEND system, and were more likely to be happy with the support their child with SEND was receiving. The report set out a series of key principles that the government should take forward in its reforms of the SEND system.

In February 2026, the government released [Every child achieving and thriving](#), which outlines its proposed reforms to the schools and SEND systems in England. The document sets out funding for inclusion in mainstream schools, the introduction of individual support plans, a new tiered system of support, EHCP assessments at transition points, staff training, and an Expert at Hand service, among other changes. These announcements build on previous reforms, such as the introduction of 'Inclusion' as a distinct category in Ofsted frameworks.

**“Outcomes for students with SEND from poorer backgrounds tend to be worse than their wealthier counterparts.”**

Overall, the government is seeking to improve inclusion in mainstream schools, arguing that high standards and inclusion should be seen as “two sides of the same coin”.<sup>1</sup> However, there are concerns about the capacity of mainstream schools to achieve this vision, what the reforms might mean for pupils with high needs, and where this leaves other priorities and challenges facing schools. There is also an awareness that approaches to inclusion will vary between schools, and that some schools will be supporting a greater proportion of pupils with SEND than other schools.

In this context, we wanted to understand current inclusion challenges through the lens of admissions. Previous Sutton Trust research has found that schools vary greatly in the proportion of their pupils eligible for Free School Meals (FSM), with top schools having particularly low rates relative

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education. 2026. 'Every child achieving and thriving'. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6996ee6a047739fe61889e05/Every\\_child\\_achieving\\_and\\_thriving\\_web\\_accessible\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6996ee6a047739fe61889e05/Every_child_achieving_and_thriving_web_accessible_version.pdf)

both to the average school and also to their local areas. With the government aspiring for mainstream schools to be more inclusive of pupils with SEND, we sought to understand how differences in schools' socio-economic composition relate to patterns of SEND intake at the school and local authority level. Moreover, given the 'double disadvantage' facing pupils who are FSM-eligible and have an identified SEND, we wanted to understand the admissions patterns for this group.

In this report, we analyse the relationship between disadvantage and SEND, drawing on data from the 2023/24 academic year. We begin by outlining how pupil outcomes differ between pupils when we consider the interaction of SEND and FSM. The report then turns to how SEND and disadvantage interact in admissions at the school and local authority level, revealing a positive relationship between levels of SEN Support and FSM. We then look at the admissions of the top 500 schools in the country. Here, we find that top schools tend to take fewer pupils eligible for FSM and with SEND relative to their catchments, with particularly notable gaps for pupils who sit within both categories. Finally, we draw on original polling of school senior leaders to explore both the factors that might be informing these admissions patterns and what they would need to educate more pupils with SEND.

Overall, we argue that if the government is ambitious about making mainstream schools more inclusive, it needs to acknowledge and address the differences in the intake of pupils with an identified SEND within mainstream schools. This is particularly true of pupils who are FSM-eligible and have an identified SEND, who, as shown in previous Sutton Trust research, face a 'double disadvantage' in the current system.

Moreover, our senior leader polling suggests that some schools have developed a reputation for being particularly inclusive of pupils with SEND and that the inverse is true of some schools. It also makes clear that senior leaders feel greater staffing, both in terms of teachers and TAs, and specialist support, would make the biggest difference in terms of them educating more pupils with SEND.

SEND is a large, aggregated category. We attend to differences between SEN Support and EHCPs but acknowledge there are inconsistencies in identification between schools and local authorities. This underlines the importance of greater consistency in identification and this being a key pillar of government reforms.

**“Our senior leader polling suggests that some schools have developed a reputation for being particularly inclusive of pupils with SEND and that the inverse is true of some schools.”**

# Context: uneven admissions

Sutton Trust research has previously shown that social selection is an issue in many of our highest performing state comprehensive schools.<sup>2</sup> These reports showed that the 500 highest performing state comprehensives had, on average, fewer children eligible for FSM than the national average as well as fewer than their local areas. The research indicated that localised social segregation between schools sees fewer FSM-eligible pupils accessing a high performing school, even if there is one in their local area.

There are several factors contributing to these patterns, both on the parent and school end. One of major factor is that of schools rely on proximity as the primary driver of admissions.<sup>3</sup> High-performing schools can influence the housing market and this can push lower-income families to live at the outer edges of a good school's catchment area or to leave the catchment altogether. Other factors include the costs associated with a specific school, for example its uniform, and how accessibly a school communicates, for example writing its admissions policy in an easy-to-understand format, as well as the complexity of admissions procedures (particularly acute at faith schools).<sup>4</sup> This is often accompanied by a lack of awareness among school leaders of the problem, coupled with incentives built into the school accountability system through Ofsted inspections and school performance tables which may drive pupil intake.

Since August 2023, the Sutton Trust has been [working directly with school leaders](#) to better understand this challenge and make direct changes to school policies and approaches to admissions. Throughout this time, many leaders have raised that whilst there are issues with the admissions of children eligible for FSM, there are also significant issues with admissions for children with SEND.

In the context of the government's desire to expand and improve provision for pupils with SEND in mainstream schools, we wanted to understand how the SEND composition of schools varies and how that interrelates with

<sup>2</sup> Cullinane, C. 2024. 'Social Selection on the Map 2024'. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/social-selection-on-the-map/>

<sup>3</sup> Burgess, S. et al. 2025. 'Modifying school choice for more equitable access in England'. [modifying-school-choice-for-more-equitable-access-in-england-2025.pdf](#)

<sup>4</sup> The Sutton Trust. Fair Admissions. <https://www.suttontrust.com/fair-school-admissions/>

socio-economic disadvantage, as well as the impact of having SEND on getting into certain types of school, in particular higher performing ones.

## Definitions and methods

### Defining Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) is a broad umbrella term, covering a range of needs and disabilities.

There are two levels of support currently used to target pupils with SEND in schools:

- SEN Support generally describes a lower level of support that can be provided by teachers or teaching assistants. This is largely funded through a school's existing budget, albeit some local authorities (LAs) provide additional funding for pupils on SEN Support.
- Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) are support plans put in place by the LA for pupils requiring a higher level of support. EHCPs are legally binding documents outlining a pupil's needs and the support that must be provided.

SEN coordinators (SENCOs) in schools decide on SEN Support, while EHCPs are issued by LAs following applications from schools or parents. While schools must cover the first £6,000 needed to support any pupil with SEND, the remaining cost of the provision specified in an EHCP must be met by the LA.

Our [Double Disadvantage](#) report explains the SEND system in greater detail.

### Defining the top 500 comprehensive secondary schools

The 'top 500 comprehensive schools' are defined throughout this report using the following three measures of school-level attainment:

- Progress 8 – The average of each pupil's Progress 8 score for all eligible Year 11 pupils at the school. A Progress 8 score compares a pupil's Attainment 8 score to all other pupils nationally who had similar Key Stage 2 results at the end of primary school.

- Attainment 8 – A pupil’s Attainment 8 score is the sum of eight different Key Stage 4 qualifications. This includes mathematics, English, three qualifications from EBacc subjects and three other qualifications. Attainment 8 at school level is the average of each pupil’s Attainment 8 score for all eligible Year 11 pupils at the school.
- Percentage of pupils achieving grade four or above in English and Maths GCSE

All schools in scope were ranked according to their scores on each of the attainment measures from the 2023/24 academic year and the top 500 schools form the group of interest for each measure.

## Methods

The analysis in this report is split into three parts. The underlying data for parts one and two are primarily drawn from analysis of the National Pupil Database conducted by NFER for the Sutton Trust. This work contains statistical data from ONS which is Crown Copyright. The use of the ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates. The analysis was carried out in the Secure Research Service, part of the Office for National Statistics.

The first part looks at patterns of secondary school intakes by free school meal eligibility and SEND status, drawing on publicly available DfE statistics and the National Pupil Database. We then look at the relationship between FSM and SEND rates at the school and local authority level. Our analysis looks at mainstream secondary schools in England, drawing on 2023/24 data.

SEND is a broad umbrella term, capturing a range of needs and disabilities. There are also debates about the recognition and identification of certain forms of SEND, and inconsistencies in how schools identify SEND. These dynamics are explored in [Double Disadvantage](#). It should also be noted that SEND status is identified in the January school census in Year 7, and thus after pupils have already begun at secondary school, and may reflect changes to their SEND registration during that time.

In the second part of the report, we explore the SEND and FSM composition of high performing secondary schools – seeking to understand how the intake of these schools differs from mainstream schools as a whole and in comparison to their local catchments. We categorise these schools using

three different accountability measures: Progress 8, Attainment 8 and Grade 4 or above in English and Maths.

We used FSM as a proxy to measure the social composition of the top 500 comprehensive schools. In this analysis, a school's FSM rate is the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals based on the school's youngest cohort (generally Year 7) in the academic years 2023/24, 2022/23 and 2021/22.

When comparing with our Selective Comprehensives 2024 report, it should be noted that data from 2021/22 is included in both. Catchment areas were created by including LSOAs (Lower Super Output Areas) where at least five pupils had attended in the previous three years.

We followed a similar approach for SEND, in which we estimate three measures: pupils with an EHCP; pupils with SEN Support; and pupils with any SEND (which is the combination of EHCP and SEN Support pupils).

FSM and SEND rates for the entire group of top 500 schools (for each outcome measure) were calculated using the number of Year 7 pupils in each FSM and SEN measure across the top 500 as a proportion of all Year 7 pupils at the same set of schools.

It is worth noting that, a school's rate is based on the rates in their Year 7 intake for the last three academic years: 2021/22, 2022/23 and 2023/24, whereas the rankings for the top 500 groups are based on the attainment of pupils in Year 11 in 2023/24.

The third part of the report looks to understand senior leader perceptions concerning SEND provision and admissions. We draw on original polling of over 2,000 primary and secondary school senior leaders, conducted through TeacherTapp, with results weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics. The survey was conducted on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2026. The first question is n=2,246. The second question is n=2,293.

Further methodological considerations are noted in the Appendix.

# What is the relationship between FSM and SEND rates at the school and local authority level?

## Schools with higher FSM rates tend to have higher SEND rates

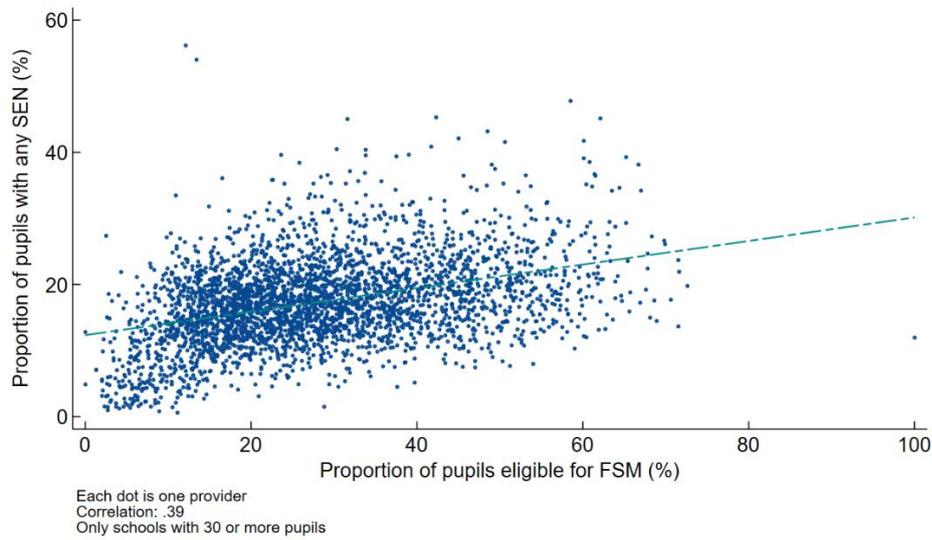
In [Double Disadvantage?](#), we note that pupils with an identified SEND are more likely to be eligible for FSM than those without an identified SEND. Building on this analysis, we wanted to understand the relationship between secondary schools' FSM intake and the proportion of pupils with SEND.

The below graphs show the relationship between the proportion of pupils eligible for FSM and different SEND measures at the school level.

Schools with higher levels of FSM tend to have higher levels of SEND. Figure 1 shows a positive correlation (0.39) between SEND ('Any SEN') and FSM. However, this relationship is notably different when we look at rates for SEN Support and EHCPs separately. Figure 2 shows a positive relationship (0.4) between SEN Support and FSM, while Figure 3 shows a much weaker positive relationship (0.15) between EHCP rate and FSM rate.

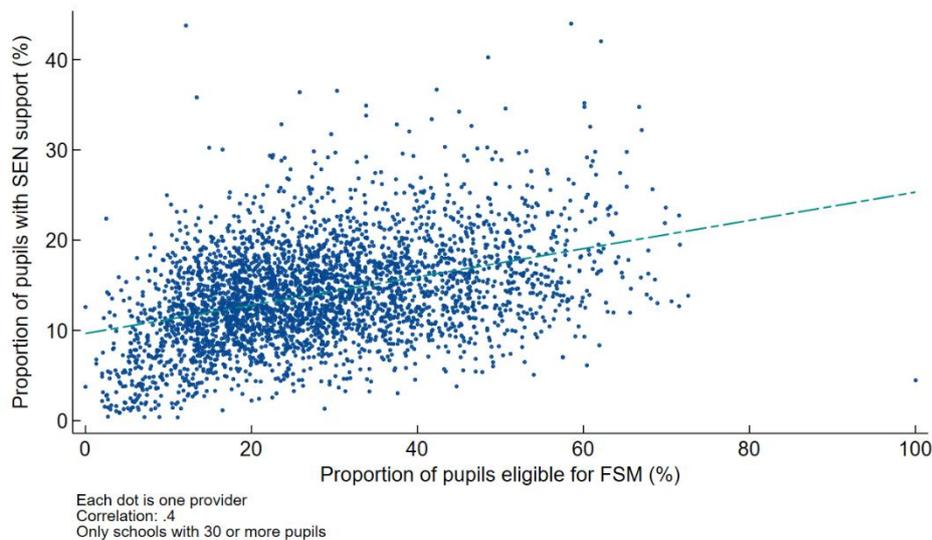
**“In Double Disadvantage?, we note that pupils with an identified SEND are more likely to be eligible for FSM than those without an identified SEND.”**

**Figure 1: The relationship between Any SEN and FSM at the secondary school level**

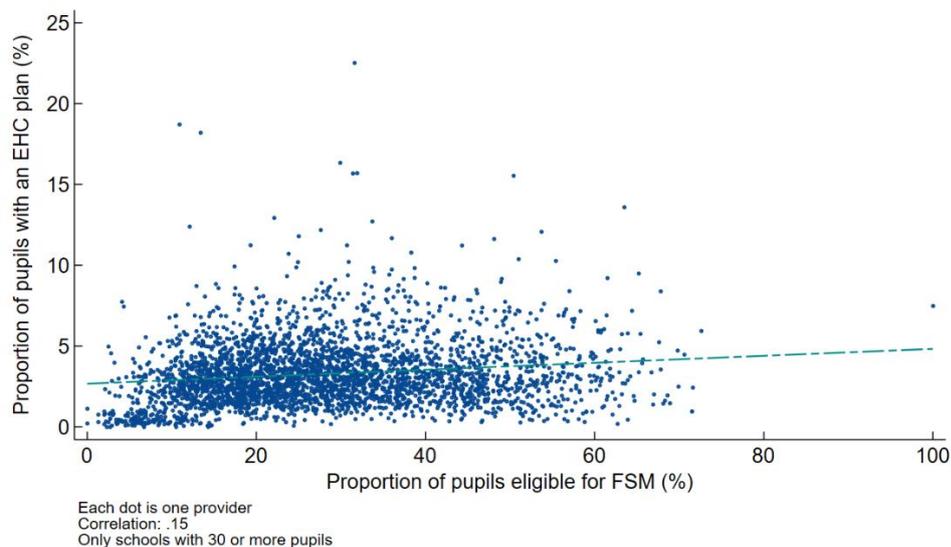


Note: The data for figures in this section is drawn from 'Special educational needs in England' and 'Schools, pupils and their characteristics'. It focuses on mainstream state-funded secondary schools with 30 pupils or more and excludes schools without any KS4 pupils.

**Figure 2: The relationship between SEN support and FSM at the secondary school level**



**Figure 3: The relationship between EHCPs and FSM and the secondary school level**



There may be several factors contributing to these discrepancies. Previous [research](#) has found that children with SEND living in affluent areas are more likely to receive EHCPs<sup>5</sup> while the Sutton Trust’s [Double Disadvantage report](#) found that more affluent parents find the EHCP system easier to navigate. There are also complex interactions between SEN Support and FSM. For instance, the impact of poverty may see a child present, on the surface, like they have a SEND. One example of this can be seen with behaviour. For instance, poverty may contribute to some pupils ‘acting out’, which could then see them recorded as having social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). Disaggregating different categories of SEND in this data to explore such dynamics was not possible, but the relationship between different forms of SEND and FSM are explored in Double Disadvantage.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, T. 2023. ‘Inequalities in provision for primary children with special educational needs and / or disabilities (SEND) by local area deprivation’. <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper231.pdf>

## Local authorities with bigger differences in FSM intake between schools also have greater variation in SEND intake

We also wanted to understand the relationship between FSM and SEND at the local authority level.

Here, we find that FSM and SEND rate patterns are similar to those found at the school level.<sup>6</sup> LAs with higher overall FSM rates tend to have higher levels of SEND overall (correlation of 0.29) and in the SEN support category (0.32), with no relationship (0) between local authority disadvantage and EHCPs. These figures are included in the Appendix.

**“LAs with higher overall FSM rates tend to have higher levels of SEND overall.”**

Given our interest in how intake varies between local schools, we also wanted to understand the extent to which FSM and SEND rates vary between schools in a local authority. As shown in [Social Selection on the Map](#)<sup>7</sup>, in some local authorities, intake of FSM-pupils varies greatly between schools, while in others it is more uniform. Similarly, some local authorities will have greater inter-school variation in SEND intake than others. Our analysis therefore considers whether LAs with bigger differences in FSM rates between schools also have bigger differences in SEND rates between schools.<sup>8</sup>

To understand these patterns, we calculate inter-school differences in FSM intake using schools at the 10<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentiles and the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles in a given local authority (see Appendix). This shows the relative spread between schools in an area with the highest and lowest levels of FSM. We then did this same calculation for SEND, before analysing the relationship between these data points.

When using the 10<sup>th</sup> and 90<sup>th</sup> percentile schools in the LA, we see a positive relationship (correlation of 0.22) between the size of difference in any SEN gap between schools and the difference for FSM. This also holds (0.3) when we look at the gap between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles.

<sup>6</sup> We exclude areas with fewer than five state-funded secondary schools from our analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Cullinane, C. 2024. 'Social Selection on the Map'. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/social-selection-on-the-map/>

<sup>8</sup> We estimate this measure as follows: Using the school rates, we define gaps as the difference between the values at the 75 percentile minus the value at 25 percentile within LAs (we also include an alternative specification with percentile 90 and 10). An interpretation of these measures is that the higher the gap, the more diverse the school rates within the LA.

There is also a positive relationship (0.24) for SEN Support and FSM when we look at the gap between the 90<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles. This relationship holds (0.22) when we look at the gap between the 25<sup>th</sup> and 75<sup>th</sup> percentiles. However, there is no discernible relationship between EHCP gaps and FSM gaps.

Overall, we find that local authorities with more variable FSM rates show similar patterns with SEND.

In the next chapter, we will turn specifically to the composition of top-performing schools in terms of FSM and SEND intake compared to their catchment areas and nationally.

## SEND and FSM rates at high performing comprehensives

In a system characterised by high levels of accountability, league tables rank secondary schools on the attainment and progress their pupils achieve. Introduced in 2016, Progress 8 has become the key measure by which secondary schools are judged. The idea here is that it accounts for pupil attainment at the end of primary to better capture the progress they make at secondary school.

Notwithstanding the strengths of this measure, there are some concerns that it does not account for other contextual factors that may influence pupil progress. For instance, pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds consistently tend to make less progress than their more affluent counterparts, which could have a bearing on school results. This is also the case for pupils with SEND. As discussed in [Selective Comprehensives](#), the prominence of this measure may affect the choices of parents as well as the high-performing schools themselves when it comes to their approach to admissions. This may then contribute to socially stratified pupil intakes within local areas.

In response to this challenge, there have been attempts to explore an 'Adjusted Progress 8' measure that better accounts for the effects of pupil

background.<sup>9</sup> The government has also opened a consultation on improving accountability measures, including “a better way to recognise the progress of pupils with low prior attainment as part of improvements to the wider suite of additional performance measures”.<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, we look at the SEND and FSM composition of the top 500 secondary schools according to several of the main current accountability measures – exploring how the intake of these schools differs from mainstream schools as a whole. In the following section, we compare the SEND and FSM intakes of top comprehensive schools to national averages as well as their catchment areas.

## **Top schools tend to have a lower proportion of FSM-eligible pupils than their local catchment**

As we found in our 2024 report, the top performing secondary comprehensives tend to have lower FSM intakes than the national average for mainstream schools. This pattern is particularly pronounced when we look at top schools by Attainment 8.<sup>11</sup> Top schools for Attainment 8 average an FSM rate of 16.7%, which is 9.7 percentage points lower than the national average FSM rate of 26.4%.

We also wanted to better understand the FSM composition of schools relative to their catchment areas – do schools have more or fewer FSM pupils than we might expect given their catchment?

To explore this, we measured the FSM gap – the gap between the school’s FSM rate and the FSM rate in their catchment area (where a positive number would indicate the school have a greater proportion of pupils eligible for FSM than their catchment area), which indicates whether schools reflect the community they draw their pupils from.

<sup>9</sup> PolicyBristol. 2019. ‘The Government’s Progress 8 school performance measure needs to account for pupil background’. <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/policy-briefings/progress-8-school-performance/>

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education. 2026. ‘Key stage 4 performance measures and targeted RISE extension’. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/key-stage-4-performance-measures-and-targeted-rise-extension>

<sup>11</sup> Latham, K. 2024. ‘Selective Comprehensives 2024’. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/selective-comprehensives-2024/>

Table 1 shows that top comprehensive schools tend to be less representative of their local intake than other local schools. While top comprehensive schools (across all measures) have lower than average school FSM rates than all secondary comprehensives, their catchment areas tend to be only slightly less disadvantaged in terms of FSM eligibility. This means that the lion's share of the gap between top schools and the average school is accounted for by what amounts to social selection within a locality, rather than simply the location of these schools in more affluent areas.

**“Table 1 shows that top comprehensive schools tend to be less representative of their local intake than other local schools.”**

**Table 1: FSM rates tend to be lower among the schools with the highest progress and attainment**

	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:			
	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school FSM rate	26.4	20.3	16.7	16.0
Average FSM rate in school catchment area	27.4	25.4	23.1	22.2
FSM Gap (Average difference between school and catchment FSM rates)	<b>-1.0</b>	<b>-5.1</b>	<b>-6.3</b>	<b>-6.1</b>

Comparing to the last time we calculated these figures in Selective Comprehensives 2024, the gaps in terms of percentage points have gone up across all categories of high performing school, with top Progress 8 schools converging with top schools for attainment, consistent with the longer term pattern since 2017. However, these increases largely reflect increased FSM levels generally, and when you take this into account by looking at proportional gaps, at top Progress 8 schools the picture is unchanged (taking around 20% fewer FSM pupils than live in catchment), while at top Attainment 8 schools it has improved slightly (from 30% fewer to 27% fewer).

Table 2 explores the patterns of absolute gaps in greater detail, showing the size of FSM gaps between top schools and how this varies depending on the accountability measure being used to categorise top schools. We find that

41% of schools in the Top 500 for Progress 8 have FSM gaps of more than 5 percentage points, as well as over half (51%) of top schools by Attainment 8.

**Table 2: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by FSM gap**

FSM gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
Positive gap	1,526	51%	121	24%	72	14%
0% to -4.9%	877	29%	172	34%	174	35%
-5% to -9.9%	442	15%	135	27%	169	34%
-10% to -14.9%	132	4%	50	10%	60	12%
-15% or more	40	1%	22	4%	25	5%

Overall, this section illustrates that top performing schools continue to take a lower proportion of FSM-eligible pupils relative to their catchment areas and the national average for mainstream schools.

**“As we saw with regards to FSM, top schools take a lower proportion of pupils with SEND relative to the national average for mainstream schools and their local catchment.”**

## Top schools also tend to have a lower proportion of pupils identified for SEN support than their local catchment

As we saw with regards to FSM, top schools take a lower proportion of pupils with SEND relative to the national average for mainstream schools and their local catchment. However, this pattern differs between EHCPs and SEN Support. Top schools have the same rates of EHCPs as the average school, and there is virtually no difference between their intakes and their catchment areas. (see Appendix). This is perhaps accounted for by the requirement to prioritise pupils with EHCPs in admissions. However, for pupils with SEN support, similar patterns are seen as with FSM, albeit they are less pronounced. Looking proportionally to allow comparison, while top Progress 8 schools take 20% fewer FSM pupils than live in their local area, the figure for SEN support is 9% fewer. Similarly, SEN support gaps at top schools for attainment are less than half that for FSM.

**Table 3: SEN Support rates among top secondary schools**

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school SEN Support rate	14.6	11.9	11.3	11.2
Average SEN Support rate in school catchment area	14.2	13.1	12.8	12.8
SEN Gap (Average difference between school and catchment SEN Support rates)	0.4	-1.2	-1.6	-1.7

Table 4 explores SEN Support gap patterns in greater detail, showing the size of SEN Support gaps between top schools and how this varies depending on the accountability measure in question. It shows that top schools are more likely to have negative SEN Support gaps than other comprehensive schools. 64% of the top schools by Progress 8 score have a negative SEN Support gap, while this figure is 71% when we look at Attainment 8. For context, just 46% of all comprehensive secondary schools have a negative SEN Support gap. Tables for Any SEN and EHCP gaps are given in the Appendix.

**Table 4: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by SEN Support gap**

SEN Support gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
5 p.p. or more	368	12%	29	6%	21	4%
Between 2.5 (inclusive) and 5 p.p.	475	16%	45	9%	37	7%
Between 0 p.p. (inclusive) and 2.5 p.p.	795	26%	104	21%	89	18%
Between 0 p.p. and -2.5 p.p. (inclusive) .	780	26%	141	28%	159	32%
Less than -2.5 p.p.	599	20%	181	36%	194	39%

Overall, this suggests that top comprehensives tend to have a lower proportion of pupils with SEN Support than the proportion in their catchment area.

There are numerous potential factors that may contribute to these patterns, including the composition of mainstream, independent and alternative provision settings in the local area. There may also be schools that have developed reputations for their support for pupils with SEND. Some of these dynamics in relation to admissions are explored through the survey of senior leaders covered later in this report.

## **Top schools that are less representative in terms of disadvantage tend to also be less representative in terms of SEN Support**

We also find that schools that are less representative than their local catchment areas in terms of FSM rates tend to be less representative in terms of SEND, and particularly SEN Support.

Table 5 presents the distribution of schools in terms of both their FSM and SEND gaps relative to their catchments. It shows that schools with negative FSM gaps are very slightly more likely to have a negative EHCP gap across both all comprehensive secondary schools and top performing comprehensive schools based on Attainment 8 (69 per cent compared to 58 per cent), but there are no differences with top performing Progress 8 scores (57 per cent).

However, when it comes to SEN Support or Any SEND, schools with a negative FSM gap are much more likely to have a negative SEND gap, particularly among top comprehensive schools. 73% of top schools for Attainment 8 that have a negative FSM gap also have a negative SEN Support gap. This suggests that top comprehensive schools which are less representative in terms of disadvantage, are also less representative in terms of SEN Support.

This is not altogether surprising as there is a significant overlap between pupil disadvantage and SEND identification. In 2024/25, while 26% of all pupils in state-funded schools were eligible for FSM, this rate was 39%

among those pupils with identified SEN Support needs and 44% among pupils with an EHCP.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 5: Spread of schools' FSM and SEND gaps**

SEND gap	FSM gap	All secondary comprehensive schools		Progress 8		Attainment 8	
		Negative FSM gap	Positive gap or null FSM gap	Negative FSM gap	Positive gap or null FSM gap	Negative FSM gap	Positive gap or null FSM gap
<b>EHCP</b>							
Negative EHCP gap		58%	50%	57%	44%	69%	43%
Positive or no EHCP gap		42%	50%	43%	56%	31%	57%
<b>SEN Support</b>							
Negative SEN support gap		62%	29%	74%	49%	73%	39%
Positive or no SEN Support gap		38%	71%	26%	51%	27%	61%
<b>Any SEND</b>							
Negative any SEND gap		62%	30%	71%	44%	69%	43%
Positive or no any SEND gap		38%	70%	29%	56%	31%	57%

Note: Each column presents the share of schools with negative or positive SEND gaps among schools with a negative or positive FSM gap respectively.

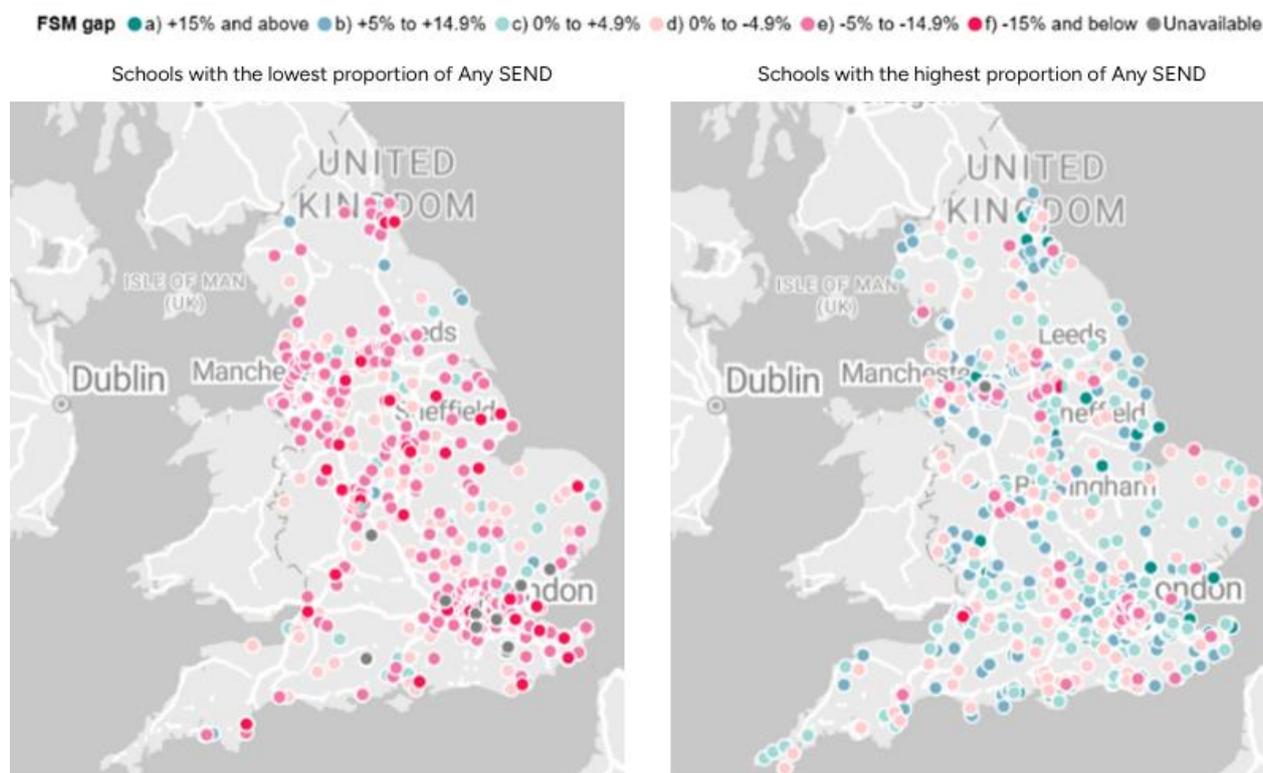
## School Admissions Dashboard: Exploring the relationship between SEND, FSM and attainment

The Sutton Trust's updated [School Admissions Dashboard](#) allows us to visually explore the relationship between school intake and attainment, with

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education. 'Special educational needs in England'. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25>

additional filters for accountability measures. The images below show that schools with higher SEND cohorts are more likely to have positive FSM gaps (indicated by darker shades of red/pink), meaning they have a greater proportion of pupils who are FSM-eligible relative to their catchment. In contrast, schools with lower SEND cohorts are more likely to have negative FSM gaps (indicated by shades of green and blue).

**Figure 4: Variation FSM gap by SEND intake variation**



## Top schools tend to have fewer pupils who are both FSM-eligible and have an identified SEND

As discussed in *Double Disadvantage?*, pupils who have an identified SEND and are eligible for FSM tend to have worse outcomes across the board than those who have SEND but are not eligible for FSM. Moreover, our polling of parents found that middle-class parents of children with SEND found it easier to navigate the SEND system than others.

In this context, we wanted to understand the intake of ‘double disadvantaged’ pupils among top comprehensive schools in comparison to their local areas.

Table 6 shows that top schools tend to take a slightly lower proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM and have an EHCP in comparison to their local catchment areas while there is no difference when compared to the national average. Top schools tend to take slightly more pupils who have an EHCP but are not eligible for FSM when compared to national averages and their local catchments. However, these differences are, again, very small.

In contrast, there are more notable differences in the intake of pupils who are both eligible for FSM and have been identified for SEN Support. Top schools take a lower proportion of pupils who are eligible for FSM and are also identified for SEN Support. While the average rate for the ‘FSM and SEN Support’ group across schools is 5.6%, this is lower among top schools by Progress 8 (3.6%), Attainment 8 (2.9%), and GCSE Grade 4+ in English and Maths (2.8%). These patterns also hold for local catchments, with gaps of –1.3pp for Progress 8 and -1.6pp gaps for the other two accountability measures. In contrast, for pupils who have SEND but not eligible for FSM, the gaps are close to 0. This shows the importance of socio-economic status, with more affluent children with SEND more likely to access a place at a high performing school if there is one in their area.

**“This shows the importance of socio-economic status, with more affluent children with SEND more likely to access a place at a high performing school if there is one in their area.”**

**Table 6: Top comprehensives take a lower proportion of pupils who are both eligible for FSM and identified for SEN Support**

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
<b>FSM and EHCP</b>				
Average school rate	1.2	1.0	0.9	0.8
Average rate in school catchment area	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.1
Average difference between school	0.0	-0.2	-0.2	-0.2

and catchment rates

<b>Non-FSM and EHCP</b>				
Average school rate	1.8	2.0	2.1	2.1
Average rate in school catchment area	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.9
Average difference between school and catchment rates	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2
<b>FSM and SEN Support</b>				
Average school rate	5.6	3.6	2.9	2.8
Average rate in school catchment area	5.7	4.9	4.5	4.4
Average difference between school and catchment rates	-0.1	-1.3	-1.6	-1.6
<b>Non-FSM and SEN Support</b>				
Average school rate	9.0	8.3	8.4	8.4
Average rate in school catchment area	8.5	8.2	8.4	8.5
Average difference between school and catchment rates	0.5	0.1	0.0	-0.1

Ultimately, this shows that top schools tend to take fewer 'double disadvantaged' pupils than other mainstream schools, with fewer compared to their local area. It also shows that the SEND gaps shown in the previous section are entirely driven by under-representation of SEND pupils who are also FSM. These patterns are covered in greater detail in the Appendix.

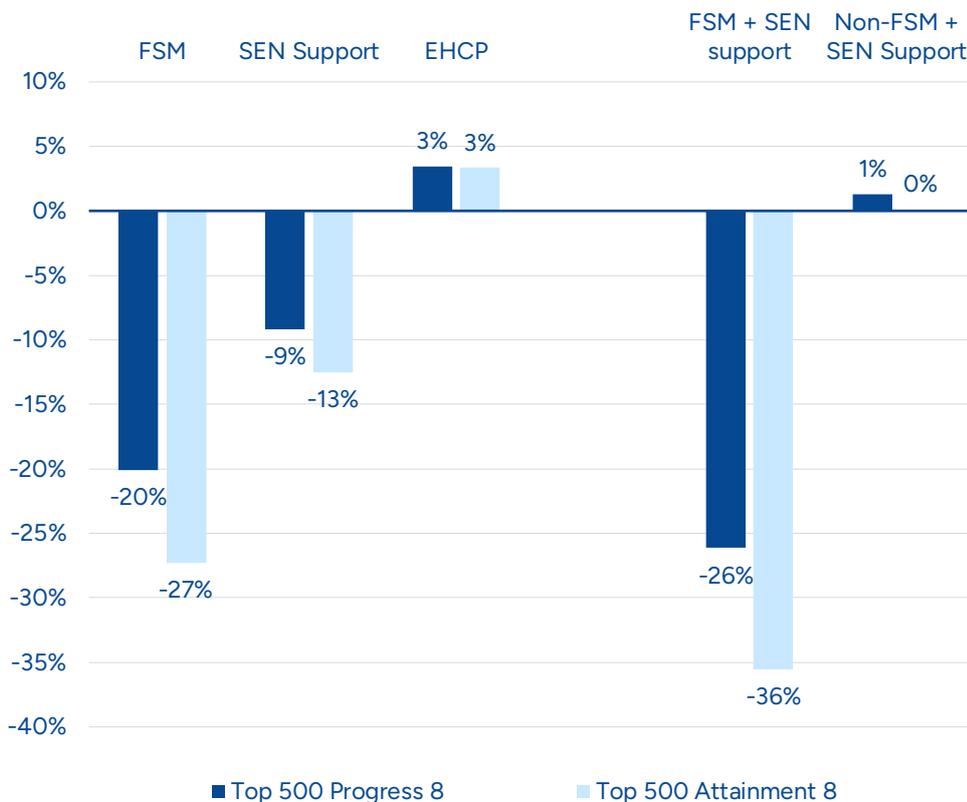
## Uneven access to top schools

Building on previous Sutton Trust research, this chapter shows that the top schools for progress and achievement tend to take fewer pupils eligible for FSM. We also find that this pattern holds for pupils with SEND. There are significant gaps for pupils with SEN Support but not for those with EHCPs. Our analysis also looked specifically at the interaction between SEND and FSM in admissions. Here, we find that top schools tend to have a lower proportion of pupils who are both eligible for FSM and have SEN Support when compared to national averages and their local catchments. There are no such gaps for non-FSM pupils with SEN support.

Figure 5 summarises these patterns across FSM, SEND categories and the interaction between the two. Given differences in the underlying rates between FSM, SEND support and EHCPs, instead of absolute percentage point gaps it looks at gaps as a proportion of the number of pupils in the catchment area. This emphasises that the scale of the FSM gaps are more significant than the SEND gaps. For example, top schools by Attainment 8 take in 27% fewer FSM pupils than live in their catchment, but only 13% fewer SEN support pupils, and for EHCPs they take in marginally more.

It also shows that the biggest gap in access to top schools is experienced by those children who are both disadvantaged and are receiving SEN support, with top Attainment 8 schools taking in 36% fewer FSM pupils with SEN support than live locally, yet there is no gap for non-FSM pupils with SEN support.

**Figure 5. Gaps at top schools as a proportion of catchment area, by FSM and SEND categories**



In the next chapter, we will draw on new polling of senior leaders to understand some of the factors and dynamics that may be contributing to some schools having a greater proportion of pupils with SEND in their intakes. We will then turn to what school leaders feel they would need to educate more children with SEND.

## What may be contributing to these differences?

There are multiple factors that may contribute to some schools having a greater or lesser proportion of pupils with SEND in their intake relative to their catchment areas. Approaches to identification of SEN Support will vary between secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. Moreover, some schools will have a different composition of mainstream schools, alternative provision and independent providers, which may contribute to these differences. There may also be differences in reputation, quality of

specialist provision, and other factors that could affect parents' admissions decisions and therefore the composition of different schools.

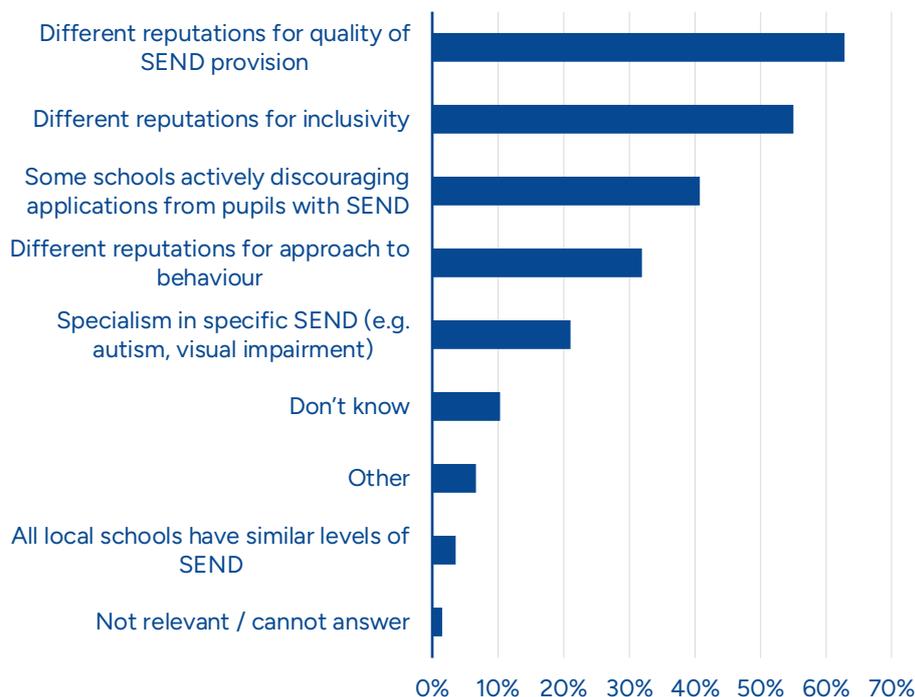
We wanted to understand what senior school leaders felt about admissions-related factors that might be contributing to some of these differences. We commissioned TeacherTapp to survey over 2,200 senior leaders in mainstream primary and secondary schools. Results are weighted to reflect teacher and school demographics.

Results split by primary and secondary schools are available in the Appendix.

## **Reputational differences, SEND specialisms and active discouragement of applications**

First, we asked senior leaders about possible admissions-related factors that may contribute to differences in SEND intake.

**Figure 6: In your local area, what are the main reasons why some mainstream schools have more pupils with SEND than others? (Select up to three)**



### Schools’ reputation for SEND provision, inclusion and behaviour are key

The polling suggests that reputational differences play a key role in school admissions. The most commonly reported reasons for differing SEND cohorts were different reputations for quality of SEND provision (63%) and different reputations for inclusivity (55%). There may be both ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors at play here – with some schools having particularly favourable or unfavourable reputations in these areas. We also found that one in five (21%) senior leaders said they felt that specialism in specific SEND was a factor that goes some way in explaining differences in admissions.

**“Almost a third (32%) of senior leaders felt different approaches to behaviour may have contributed to different intakes of pupils with SEND.”**

Almost a third (32%) of senior leaders felt different approaches to behaviour may have contributed to different intakes of pupils with SEND. It may be that a school that has a reputation for calm and consistent learning environments might seem attractive to some parents of pupils with SEND. On the other hand, some parents may feel put off by a school that has a reputation for a particularly strict approach to behaviour.

## **Many senior leaders feel some schools actively discourage applications from pupils with SEND**

Notably, the third most popular reason given for these differences was some schools actively discouraging applications from pupils with SEND (41%). 46% of primary leaders listed this as one of their three key reasons for differences in SEND intakes, compared to 32% of secondary leaders.

While children with EHCPs have a separate admissions pathway, schools are not allowed to choose their cohorts based on SEND status. However, this finding suggests senior leaders feel that some schools may be finding ways to put off parents of pupils with SEND from applying to their school.

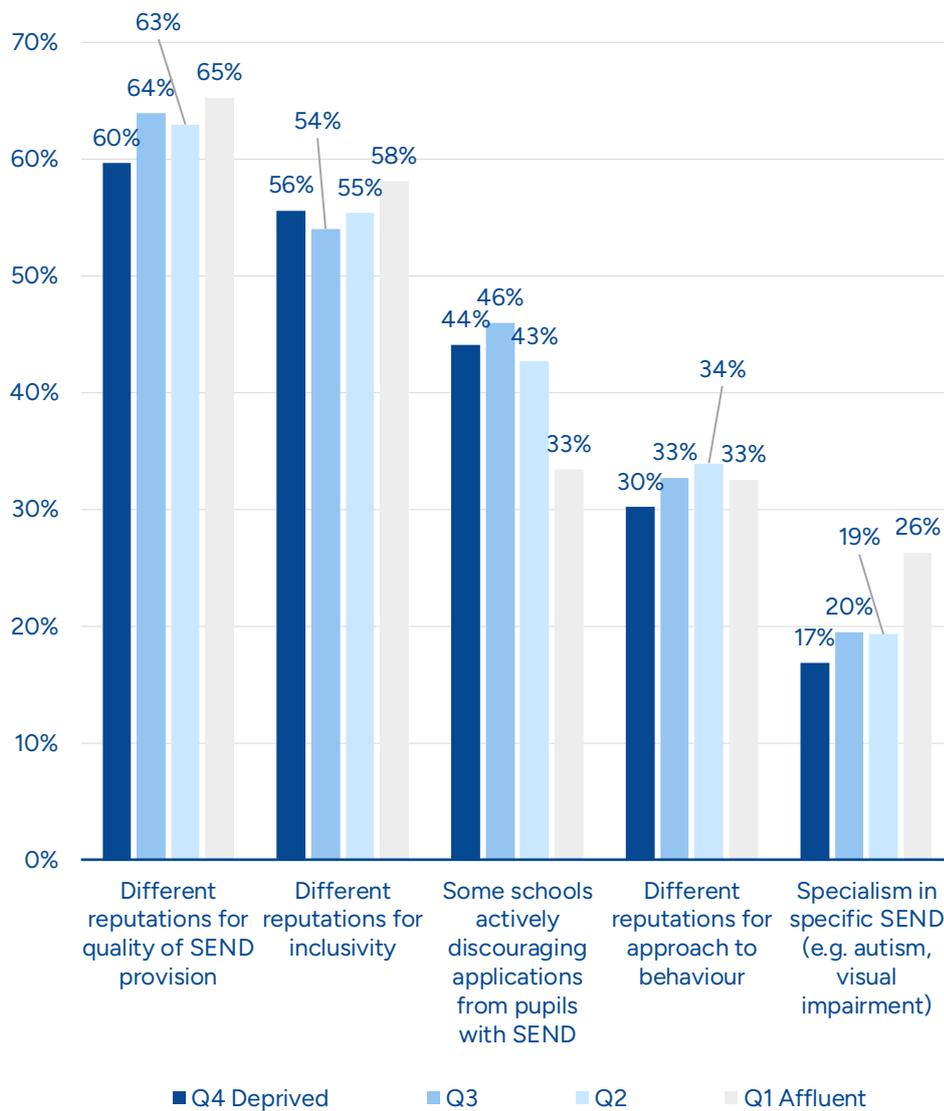
In the context of high accountability and league tables, some schools may feel concerned that pupils with SEND may compromise their standings and therefore look to take fewer pupils with SEND. This behaviour might also reflect that school staff are not confident in the quality of their SEN support, especially those on a school improvement journey, and may feel conflicted in recommending their school to prospective vulnerable learners. However, if anything, this would underline the need for the given school to improve their SEN support quality and capacity.

The fact that such a high proportion of senior leaders feel some schools discourage applications from pupils with SEND is concerning, regardless of whether the motivations surround accountability or reflections on provision quality. These results present a challenge to a government interested in supporting mainstream schools to be more inclusive.

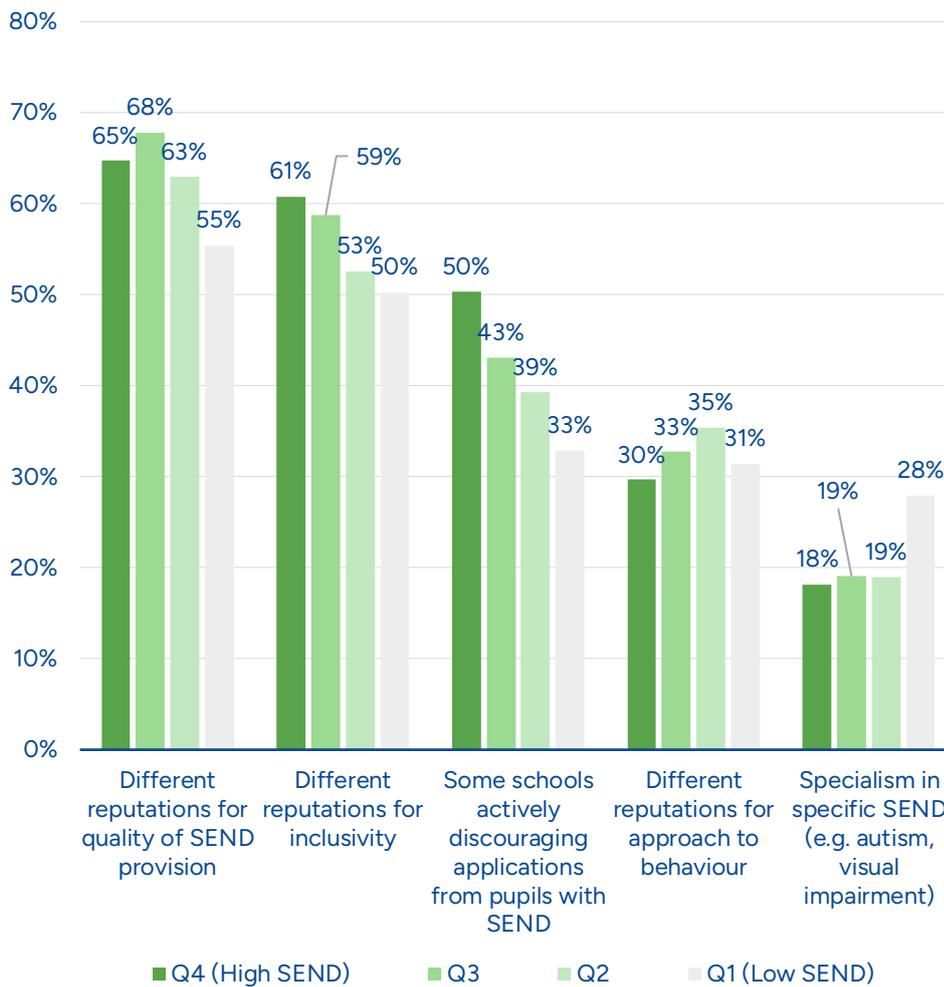
## **Schools with higher FSM and SEND cohorts were more likely to feel some schools were actively discouraging applications from pupils with SEND**

Figure 7 shows very few significant differences in responses between senior leaders in schools with different levels of disadvantage. Notably, however, while a third (33%) of those in the least disadvantaged schools feel some schools actively discourage applications from pupils with SEND, this figure is higher (44%) for those in the most disadvantaged school settings. A similar pattern emerged when we looked at responses by SEND intake quartiles. Here, we see that half (50%) of school leaders in schools with the highest level of SEND report that some schools actively discourage applications from pupils with SEND, compared to just a third (33%) of school leaders with the lowest levels of SEND.

**Figure 7: Responses to 'In your local area, what are the main reasons why some mainstream schools have more pupils with SEND than others?' broken down by FSM quartile**



**Figure 8: Responses to ‘In your local area, what are the main reasons why some mainstream schools have more pupils with SEND than others?’ broken down by SEND quartile**



### Conclusion: Strong reputational dynamics at play and concern about some schools actively discouraging parents with SEND

Overall, our polling reveals that senior leaders feel a school’s reputation for both SEND provision and inclusion are key to understanding why some schools have more children with SEND than others. This reputation is likely to be driven by a combination of school culture and practice, outcomes, longstanding local reputation, parent experience, and other factors.

Our results also suggest that schools themselves may also be directly influencing parent choice. This was more likely to be reported by school leaders with higher levels of FSM and SEND than in schools with lower levels of disadvantage and SEND.

**“These findings raise challenging questions. Some schools may have built particularly strong reputations for SEND but could this speak to weaker provision elsewhere in the school system?”**

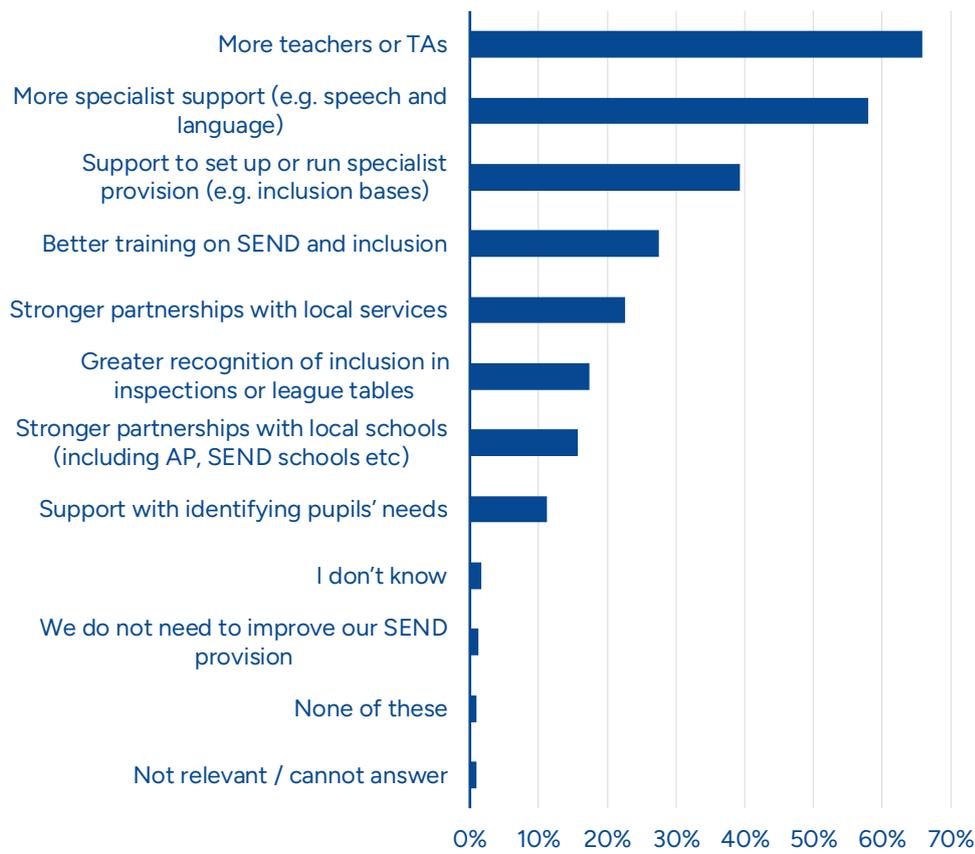
These findings raise challenging questions. Some schools may have built particularly strong reputations for SEND but could this speak to weaker provision elsewhere in the school system? How do we ensure that parents have choice and are able to apply to schools that they feel meet the specific needs of their child, while meeting the government's ambition to improve provision across all mainstream schools?

The next section explores what senior leaders feel their school would need to educate more students with SEND.

## **Understanding the support schools need to educate more pupils with SEND**

The recent Schools White Paper and accompanying SEND consultation document set out a range of measures aimed at improving the SEND system and, in particular, the capacity of mainstream schools to improve their provision for pupils with SEND. In this context, we asked mainstream primary and secondary senior leaders what they felt would be most helpful changes or investments to help their school meet this ambition. Results are outlined in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: What would most help your school to educate more students with SEND? (Select up to three)**



### Greater staff and specialist capacity is needed

Figure 9 indicates that senior leaders see greater staff and specialist capacity as key to educating more pupils with SEND. Two-thirds (66%) felt more teachers or teaching assistants (TAs) would be most helpful. This is significant in the context of enduring teacher recruitment and retention challenges. TAs often work closely with SEND pupils and recent NFER research finds that “the evidence suggests SEND is a key driver in demand for TAs”.<sup>13</sup> However, previous research has also highlighted great variation in how TAs are deployed and to what effect.<sup>14</sup> Use of TAs also differed greatly between primary and secondary schools.

<sup>13</sup> Scott, M. and Worth, J. 2026. ‘The School Support Staff Workforce in England’. [https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/331d1end/school\\_support\\_staff\\_workforce\\_in\\_england\\_2026.pdf](https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/331d1end/school_support_staff_workforce_in_england_2026.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> CFE Research. 2024. ‘Use of teaching assistants in schools’. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66e31878718edd81771316c5/Use\\_of\\_teaching\\_assistants\\_in\\_schools\\_research\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66e31878718edd81771316c5/Use_of_teaching_assistants_in_schools_research_report.pdf)

More specialist support (for example, for speech and language) was the second most popular option (58%). This underlines the challenges that schools face when seeking specialist support. The government is aiming to address some of these capacity issues through the £1.8bn investment in Experts at Hand, which looks to connect educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, and other professionals around mainstream schools.

## **Support for specialist hubs and the need for better training**

A key feature of the government's proposed SEND reforms is around 'Inclusion Bases', which sit in mainstream settings and aim to "provide bespoke learning environments, equipment and expertise to meet their needs".<sup>15</sup> There appeared to be strong appetite for support in setting up or running such specialist provision, with well over a third (39%) of school leaders choosing this option.

As discussed in the previous section, some school leaders felt that some schools had better reputations than others for SEND and inclusion than others. Increasing the availability of good, evidence-informed training for both teachers and school leaders may help to address these disparities. In this context, over a quarter (28%) of respondents felt that better training on SEND and inclusion would help them educate more pupils with SEND.

## **Some appetite for better partnerships but not as important as other support**

Partnerships are a central part of the government's Schools White Paper and plans for the SEND system. This includes establishing a new model of local partnership working and setting out an ambition for schools to join local groups with a view to pooling funding and working collaboratively to improve provision.

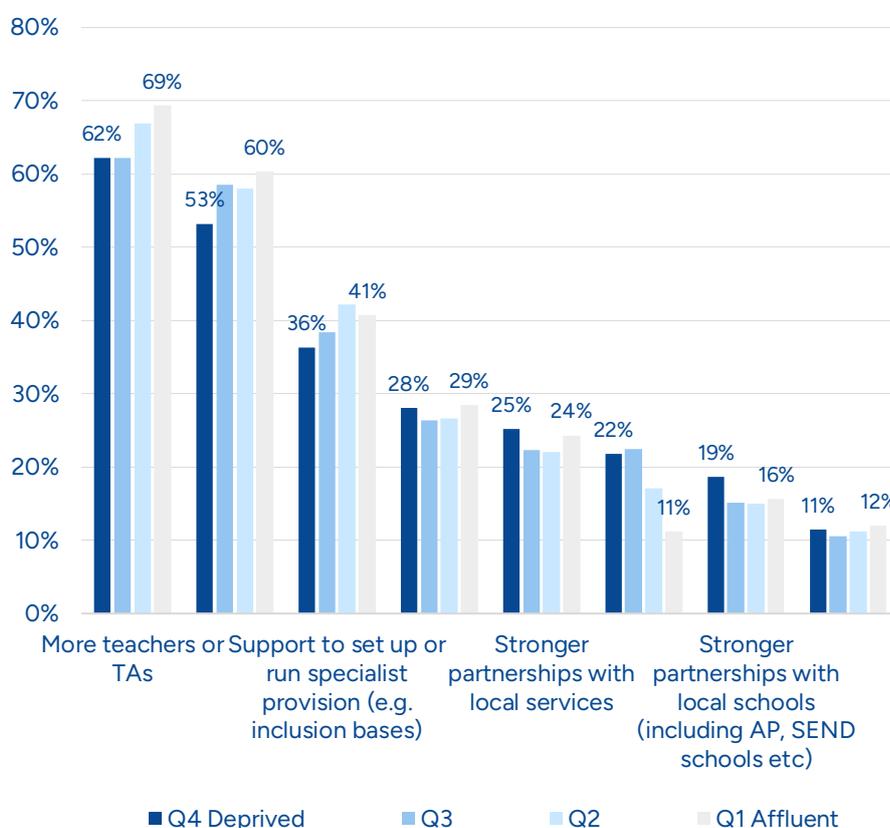
While there was some appetite to improve this partnership working, this was not seen as a key priority among school leaders. Just under a quarter (23%) of school leaders identified stronger partnerships with local services as a key potential contributor to them taking more pupils with SEND, while just 16% saw partnerships with schools as a key enabler of them educating more pupils with SEND.

<sup>15</sup> HM Government. 2026. 'SEND Reform: Putting Children and Young People First'. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69986472bfdab2546272c074/SEND\\_reform\\_putting\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people\\_first\\_government\\_consultation\\_web\\_accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/69986472bfdab2546272c074/SEND_reform_putting_children_and_young_people_first_government_consultation_web_accessible.pdf)

## Senior leader preferences varied by the composition of their cohort

Figure 10 looks at how responses varied by schools in different quartiles for FSM rates. It shows that while the most popular responses were the same across schools in all FSM quartiles, their level of popularity is slightly lower in schools with higher levels of disadvantage. School leaders in the schools with the highest levels of disadvantage were also more likely to want to see greater recognition of inclusion in inspections or league tables, as a lever for them to educate more pupils with SEND.

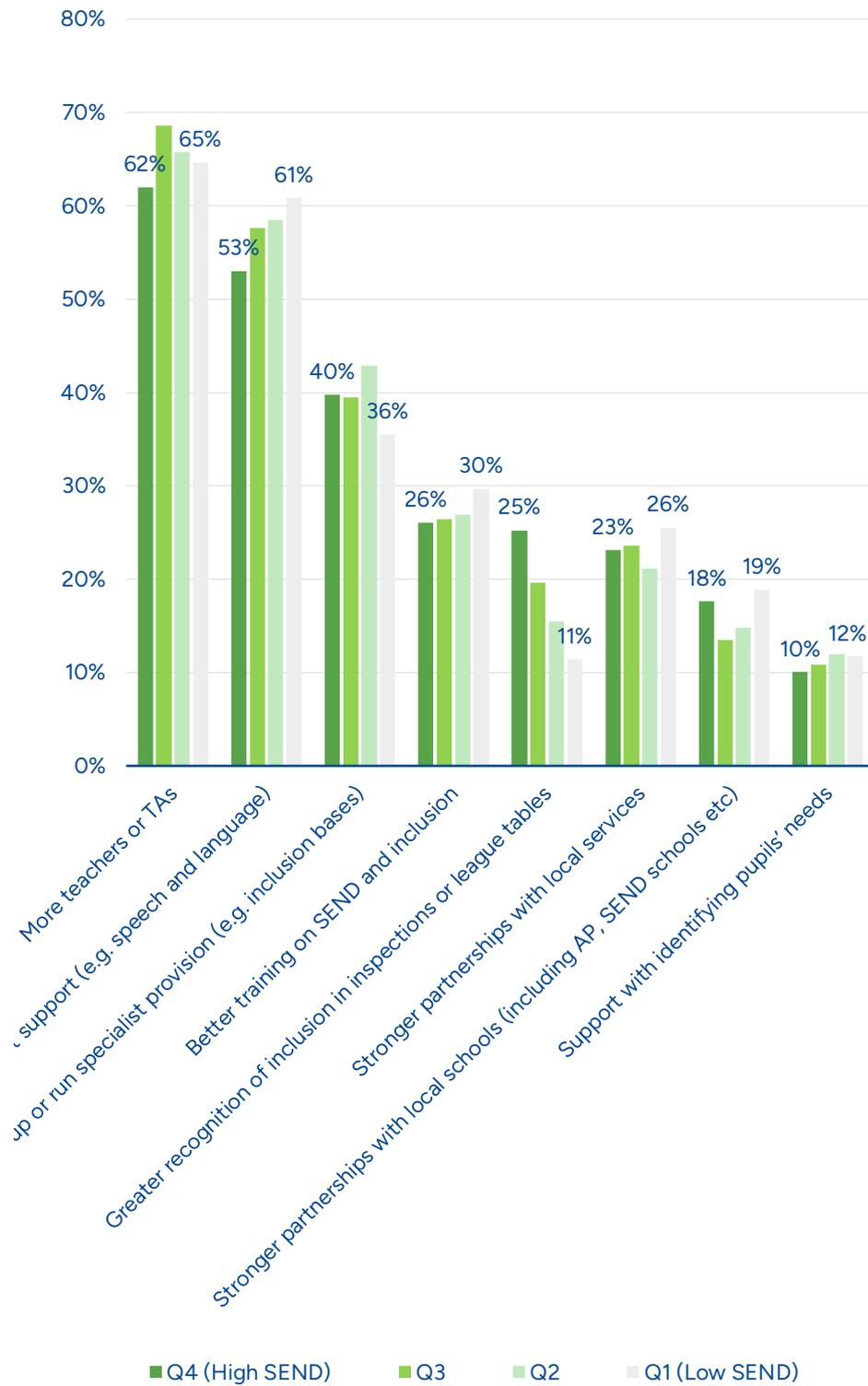
**Figure 10: Responses to ‘What would most help your school to educate more students with SEND?’ broken down by FSM quartile**



**“School leaders in the schools with the highest levels of disadvantage were also more likely to want to see greater recognition of inclusion in inspections or league tables, as a lever for them to educate more pupils with SEND.”**

Figure 11 shows the patterns across schools with differing levels of SEND. The top reasons are the same across SEND quartiles but (as with the top FSM quartile) the strength of these preferences is lower for schools with greater proportion of pupils with an identified SEND. These school leaders were also more likely to identify greater recognition of inclusion in inspections or league tables than leaders in schools with a lower proportion of pupils with an identified SEND. Additional specialist support was particularly popular amongst the low SEND group.

**Figure 11: Responses to 'What would most help your school to educate more students with SEND?' broken down by SEN quartile**



## **Conclusion: if mainstream inclusion is the aim, staffing is key**

The government has been clear that a key part of its response to the SEND crisis is teaching more pupils with SEND within mainstream schools. Our senior leader polling finds that for this to happen, more teachers or TAs are seen as a top priority. Alongside this, more specialist support was the next most popular option (58%), followed by support to set up or run specialist provision (39%). Notwithstanding some differences in their levels of support for these responses, these patterns generally hold across schools with different FSM and SEND intakes.

Overall, we see that if the government is interested in increasing mainstream provision for pupils with SEND, investment in staffing - both within and outside of schools – will be essential.

## **Conclusion**

There is widespread agreement that the current SEND system is not serving all pupils and is taking a toll on parents, school leaders, teachers and other professionals. This has been accompanied with concern about pupils' sense of belonging at school, as identified in the Schools White Paper.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, previous Sutton Trust research has highlighted that pupils' socio-economic background too often affects their experience of the SEND system.

In February 2026, the government outlined wide-ranging and extensive SEND reforms, including the introduction of individual support plans and a new tiered system of support, among other significant changes. In this report, we have focused on one of the government's key ambitions, which is to increase capacity of mainstream schools.

Building on previous Sutton Trust research on socio-economic stratification in school admissions, we found that schools with more pupils eligible for FSM tend to have higher rates of SEND. We also found that top secondary schools (based on progress and attainment metrics) tend to have fewer pupils who are eligible for FSM and fewer pupils identified for SEN Support, when compared to both national averages and their local catchments. However,

**“Overall, we see that if the government is interested in increasing mainstream provision for pupils with SEND, investment in staffing - both within and outside of schools - will be essential.”**

<sup>16</sup> Department for Education. 2026. 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6996ee6a047739fe61889e05/Every\\_child\\_achieving\\_and\\_thriving\\_web\\_accessible\\_version.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6996ee6a047739fe61889e05/Every_child_achieving_and_thriving_web_accessible_version.pdf)

the data also indicates that these differences are driven by disadvantage. Non-FSM pupils with SEN support are not under-represented at top schools compared to catchment areas. However, pupils who are eligible for FSM and have SEND are under-represented. This raises important questions for a government interested in increasing inclusion across mainstream schools and that sees standards and inclusion as “two sides of the same coin”.

It is also notable that there are no such gaps when it comes to pupils with EHCPs. High performing schools generally have the same number of pupils with EHCPs as the average comprehensive, and rates also closely match their catchment areas. In admissions, pupils with EHCPs have strict priority. This data clearly illustrates the impact of such a policy.

As the government consults on its SEND reform plans, it is vital that they hear from frontline professionals who will be tasked with implementing these reforms. With this in mind, we polled over 2,000 school senior leaders to understand what they feel might be driving current disparities in admissions. These school leaders told us that school reputation for SEND provision and inclusivity were key drivers of these differences. Concerningly, we also found that a large proportion of school leaders felt that some schools actively discourage applications from pupils with SEND. This view was most popular among schools serving more pupils with FSM and schools with more pupils with an identified SEND. It is important that having low levels of SEND is not seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. There is a danger of a cycle here where low numbers mean low levels of provision and lack of expertise and experience, with this leading to parents of SEND pupils not applying. If greater inclusion in mainstream schools is to avoid simply adding more pupils with SEND to schools with already high levels, this cycle needs to be avoided.

We also asked school leaders what would most help their school to educate more pupils with SEND. Here, it was clear that professional capacity, in terms of teachers, TAs, and specialist support were key, particularly in schools with lower levels of existing SEND.

Taken together, these findings suggest great investment in school staffing, as well as in outside specialist support would be needed to give the government the best odds of achieving its ambition. Our analysis also points to the importance of school admissions being a central feature of debates surrounding inclusion and SEND provision in mainstream schools.

In addition to efforts to make sure all pupils can succeed at their schools, many school leaders are being thoughtful and intentional about their school admissions, with a particular focus on socio-economic background. Our

report suggests that given the overlap and interaction of SEND and disadvantage, attending to socio-economic background in admissions may also see greater provision for pupils who have been identified for SEN Support. An update to our Fair Admissions Hub will provide further information and resources to support schools to think about admissions intentionally and to attend to the local context they are working in.

We are in a crucial period for the future of the SEND system – the challenges are vast and much ink has rightly been spilled on different aspects of the government’s proposed reforms. This report further underlines the importance of considering the interaction between socio-economic disadvantage and SEND in debates surrounding mainstream inclusion, as well as the importance of the admissions system. More broadly, it speaks to the importance of attending to ‘double disadvantage’ in the SEND system, as well as profiling the voices of school leaders and teachers who will be at the centre of the reforms’ implementation. It is through this on the ground insight that we can build an education system that ensures all children, regardless of background and individual characteristics, can achieve at school.

**“Our analysis also points to the importance of school admissions being a central feature of debates surrounding inclusion and SEND provision in mainstream schools.”**

# Appendix

## Further methods considerations

For the NFER analysis of the National Pupil Database:

- This report uses data from the 2023/24 academic year – at the time of writing, this was the latest data available to use for our research purposes.
- SEND is a broad umbrella term, covering a range of needs and disabilities. We make important distinctions between SEN Support and EHCPs in our analysis but acknowledge there is significant complexity within these categories.
- This analysis relies on the numbers of pupils identified as having an EHCP and/or SEN Support in Department for Education (DfE) data. This data should be interpreted with caution: SEN Support identification practices vary across schools, and local differences in how pupils are supported, assessed and issued with EHCPs can influence who receives them.
- Our SEND status data is drawn from the January school census in Year 7 to reflect secondary school intake as far as possible. Here, secondary schools may take different approaches to the extent to which they adopt labels from pupils' former primary schools and the extent to which they reassess/identify children.

# Additional data tables

## LA-level relationships between SEND rates and FSM rates

Figure A1: There is a positive relationship (0.29) between Any SEN rates and FSM rates at the local authority level

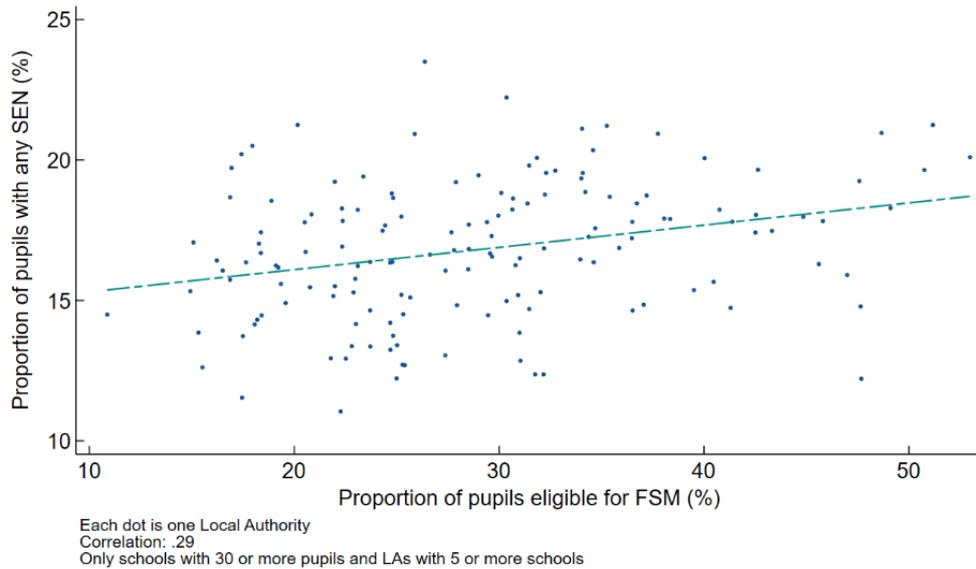
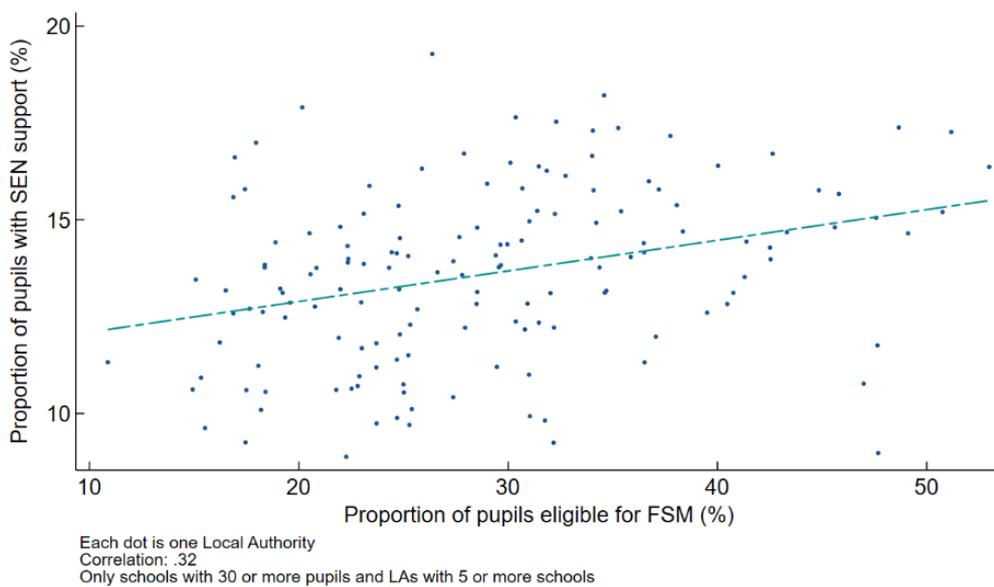
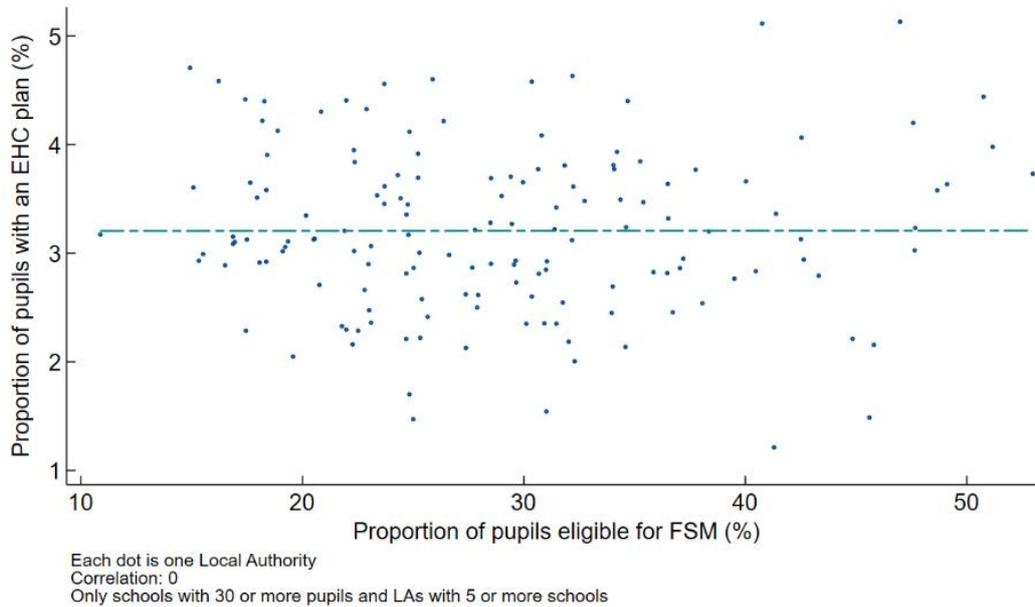


Figure A2: There is a positive relationship (0.32) relationship between SEN Support rates and FSM rates at the local authority level

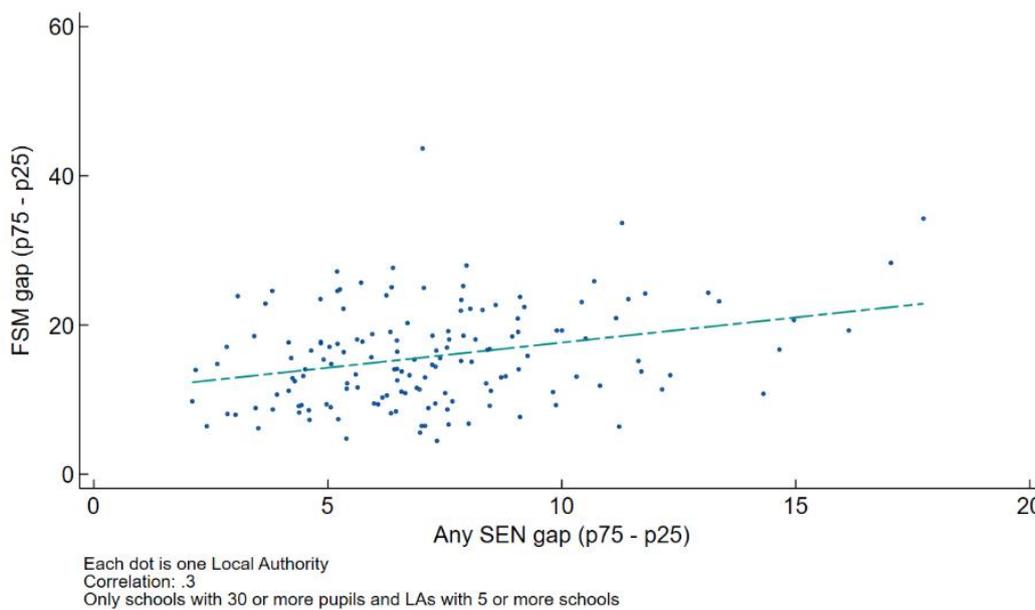


**Figure A3: There is no relationship (0) between EHCP rates and FSM rates at the local authority level**

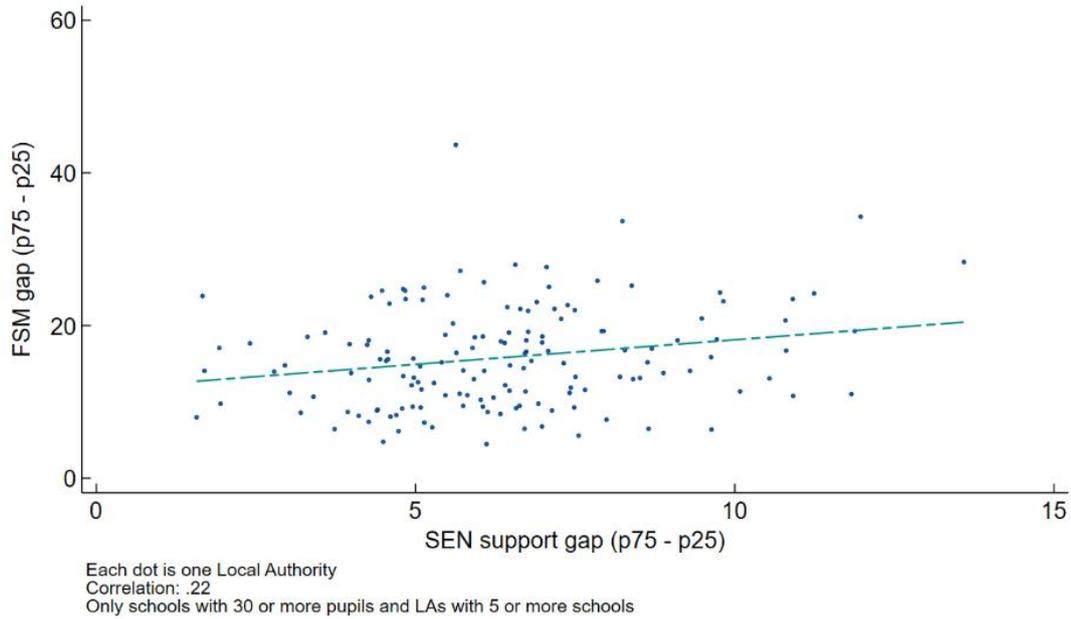


## LA-level relationships between FSM rate and SEND rate variation

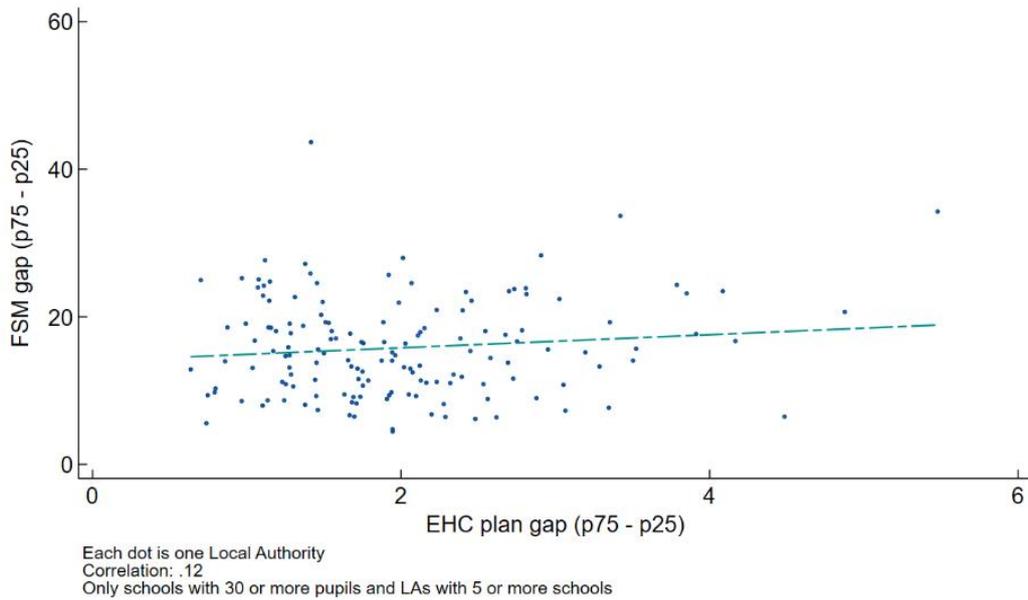
**Figure A4: There is a positive relationship (0.3) between Any SEN gaps (p75 - p25) and FSM gaps (p75 - p25) at the local authority level**



**Figure A5: There is a positive relationship (0.22) between SEN Support gap (p75 – p25) and FSM gaps (p75 –p25) at the local authority level**



**Figure A6: There is a positive relationship (0.12) between EHCP gaps (p75 – p25) and FSM gaps (p75 –p25) at the local authority level**



## Comparing EHCP intake for top comprehensive secondary schools with catchment and national averages

**Table A1: Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) rates for top secondary comprehensives are similar to national and catchment area rates**

	All secondary comprehensive schools (%)	Top 500 performing comprehensives (%) based on:		
		Progress 8	Attainment 8	Grade four or above in English and Maths
Average school EHCP rate	3.0	3.0	3.0	2.9
Average EHCP rate in school catchment area	2.9	2.9	3.0	2.9
Average difference between school and catchment EHCP rates	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.0

## Spread of top comprehensives by Any SEN and EHCP gaps

**Table A2: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by Any SEN gap**

Any SEN gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
5 p.p. or more	463	15%	39	8%	28	6%
Between 2.5 (inclusive) and 5 p.p.	463	15%	54	11%	50	10%
Between 0 (inclusive) and 2.5 p.p.	699	23%	93	19%	84	17%
Between -2.5 (inclusive) and 0 p.p.	719	24%	117	23%	127	25%
Less than -2.5 p.p.	673	22%	197	39%	211	42%

**Table A3: Spread of top 500 comprehensives by EHCP gap**

EHCP gap (percentage points)	All comprehensive secondary schools		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment 8	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
2.5 p.p. or more	230	9%	40	8%	39	8%
Between 0 (inclusive) and 2.5 p.p.	1,160	38%	188	38%	184	37%
Between -2.5 (inclusive) and 0 p.p.	1,577	52%	259	52%	264	53%
Less than -2.5 p.p.	50	2%	13	3%	13	3%

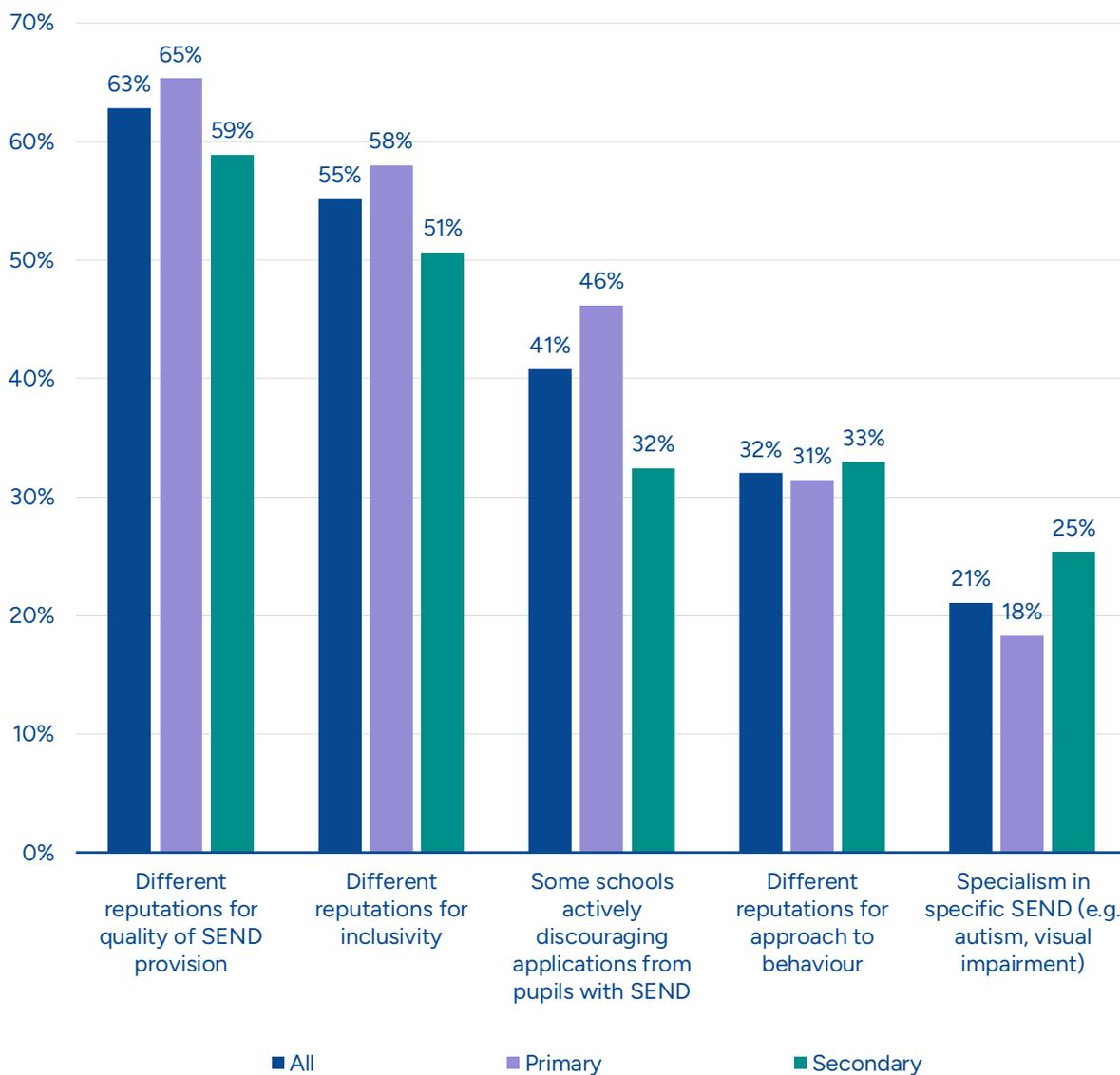
**Table A4: Composition of top comprehensives by SEND and FSM status**

	All comprehensives		Top 500 Progress 8		Top 500 Attainment	
	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools	Number of schools	% of schools
<b>FSM and EHCP</b>						
Positive or no gap	1,372	46%	176	35%	162	32%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	1,027	34%	183	37%	196	39%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	483	16%	101	20%	102	20%
Greater than -1 p.p.	136	5%	40	8%	40	8%
<b>No-FSM and EHCP</b>						
Positive or no gap	1,382	46%	258	52%	264	53%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	760	25%	99	20%	105	21%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	576	19%	89	18%	78	16%
Greater than -1 p.p.	300	10%	54	11%	53	11%
<b>FSM and SEN Support</b>						
Positive or no gap	1,472	49%	116	23%	75	15%

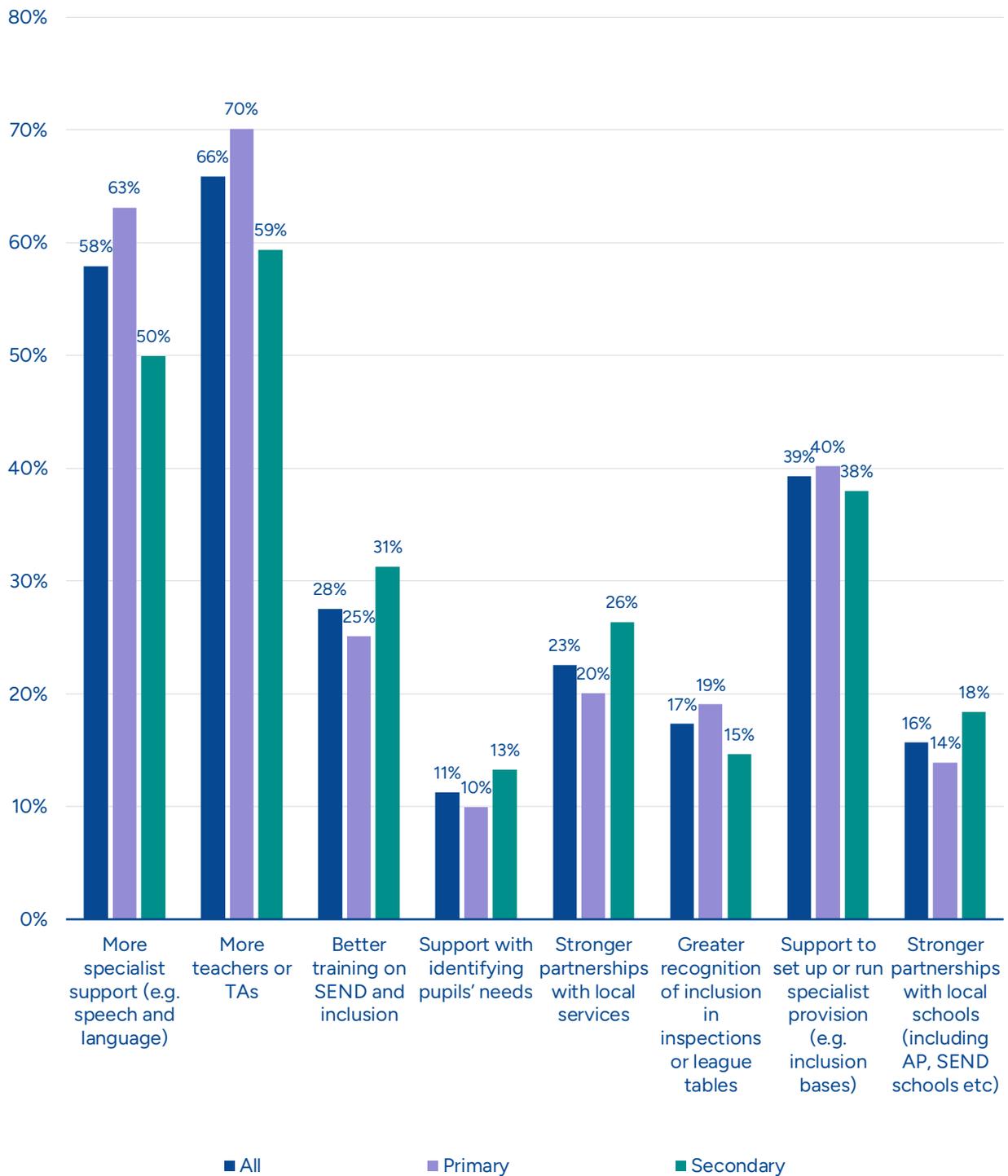
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	315	10%	50	10%	60	12%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	317	11%	61	12%	72	14%
Between -1 and -1.5 p.p. (inclusive)	238	8%	58	12%	59	12%
Greater than -1.5 p.p.	676	22%	215	43%	234	47%
<b>No FSM and SEN Support</b>						
Positive or no gap	1,666	55%	233	47%	226	45%
Between 0 and -0.5 p.p. (inclusive)	306	10%	39	8%	48	10%
Between -0.5 and -1 p.p. (inclusive)	240	8%	39	8%	39	8%
Between -1 and -1.5 p.p. (inclusive)	239	8%	54	11%	47	9%
Greater than -1.5 p.p.	567	19%	135	27%	140	28%

## Breakdown of senior leader polling by primary and secondary school

**Figure A7: Responses to 'In your local area, what are the main reasons why some mainstream schools have more pupils with SEND than others?' broken down by primary and secondary schools**



**Figure A8: Responses to 'In your local area, what are the main reasons why some mainstream schools have more pupils with SEND than others?' broken down by primary and secondary schools**





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