

Response to the Strategic Review of current SEN provision and Transformation agenda

Who we are

Our children are currently experiencing school distress and anxiety (EBSA/ABSA/EBSNA) leading to the inability to attend school. Formed in 2024, we are a coalition of parent support groups in Northern Ireland helping other families navigate this situation. We have growing social media groups who offer daily support to each other. Members are drawn from throughout NI with in-person monthly meetings in Belfast, Newcastle, Newtownabbey, Strabane and Portstewart. We are experts by lived experience.

ABSA Parent Support Group & EBSA Support Group, Newcastle

Challenges within in the current SEN Support systems

Non-attendance is a symptom that school provisions are not working

There is a school attendance crisis. School attendance data from NI was the worst on record during the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years, with around 30% of pupils having absence rates classed as 'chronic' or 'severe chronic' ⁽¹⁾.

The reasons why children can struggle to attend school are varied. Empirical evidence demonstrates that difficulties with school attendance often arise from within the school environment rather than from individual pathology. A recent study of neurodivergent children in the UK ⁽²⁾, found neuro-normative structures, under-resourcing and gate-kept support contributed to school anxiety and non-attendance among neurodivergent children, framing withdrawal as a rational response to systemic harm, rather than simple avoidance. This presents strong evidence that the school setting itself may drive withdrawal.

Children with disabilities and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are at higher risk of having attendance difficulties. In another paper on the school attendance crisis in the UK⁽³⁾, 92.1% of children and young people currently experiencing school distress were described as neurodivergent (ND) and 83.4% as autistic and concluded that attendance difficulties reflected a mismatch between the child's needs and the school context, not simple avoidance behaviour.

There is either a lack of will and/or insufficient resources in many schools to provide flexible, trauma-informed, neurodiversity-aware practices. Underfunded mental health services and a lack of joint working between relevant departments compounds this.

Mental Health challenges are a symptom that school provisions are not working

Recent studies indicate that anxiety and depression affect just over 12% of children and young people in NI, which is disproportionately higher than their counterparts in the rest of the UK, and in line with increased prevalence affecting adults (around 25% higher rate than the rest of the UK)⁽⁴⁾.

Training for teachers and other school staff on emotional distress, neurodiversity and trauma is often limited. Many do not understand the hidden signs of school distress or how school practices themselves can create or exacerbate barriers. Conversely, some of our members have been supported by extremely attuned and knowledgeable teaching and support staff within schools, who

are constrained by unresponsive leadership teams within school who are unwilling to adapt and adopt the ethos and practices required.

In recent years, limited emotional wellbeing support e.g. counselling is available in schools but the children who need it most are often not able to access it because they are unable to make it into the school building due to anxiety.

Reduced Timetables are a symptom that school provisions are not working

A reduced table is often offered as a solution for children who are struggling to attend school due to overwhelm and anxiety. Whilst this can be useful to help children transition back into a school setting, it is often used as a sticking plaster to reduce the amount of time a child is in an environment that is not working for them. There is no data on the percentage of children attending school on a reduced timetable in Northern Ireland. There is no data on how many hours per week children attend school whilst on a reduced timetable. There is no data on how many months or years children may stay on a reduced timetable for. As noted in a recent report by the Partnership for Inclusive Education ⁽⁵⁾, “Reduced timetables may at times be necessary, but often are simply unlawful, and indicate an unmet need. They must never become a proxy for exclusion”.

Gaps in the SEN Reform Agenda

Right Support

Children do well when they can, and they need to feel safe, seen and valued in school to do so. We would advocate for an education system that:

1. Gives children more flexibility and agency over what, how and when they learn, recognising different learning styles.
2. Reduces coercion and conformity as the emphasis on uniformity in the current system is more about control than learning.
3. Values intrinsic motivation over external pressure. We believe, and found within our own children that, when internally motivated, they want to and can learn deeply. Forced learning in schools of an outdated curriculum is damaging this.
4. Reforms how we assess. The current GCSE system works on a compare and rank basis rather than certifying skills. A percentage of children must fail every year. We would like to see competency based meaningful assessments.
5. Values a broader spectrum of learning to include social, emotional and creative learning in addition to academic learning.

We would also like the reform focus to be on improving school environments, routines and cultures as this would significantly reduce barriers for students who struggle to engage with education. Calm, structured settings with predictable routines help students feel secure and reduce anxiety, while flexible spaces and sensory-friendly adjustments make classrooms more accessible. A positive, inclusive school culture—where relationships are prioritised, student voice is valued and staff respond consistently and compassionately—creates a sense of belonging that is critical for re-engagement. By reshaping the environment and culture rather than placing the burden on the student to adapt, schools can remove obstacles to learning and in doing so, support every learner’s participation and success.

When this does not happen and blame is put on the child and family, parents may feel under pressure to deregister their child from school (Electively Home Educate) in order to avoid being prosecuted for their child's non-attendance. Data provided by the Department of Education reveal an almost four-fold rise in the number of pupils known to be EHE (287 in 17/18, rising to 1099 in 24/25). Whilst reasons for deregistration are not recorded, anecdotally we hear increasing stories of parents driven to deregister through fear of prosecution, fear of declining mental health in their children, and desperation/hopelessness over the system not meeting the needs of their child.

Right People

We would like to see more training for staff on how best to support autistic children, children with ADHD, PDA, dyslexia, OCD, Tourette's and other conditions. We would like staff to receive training on how best to support children who are suffering from anxiety and in particular school-based anxiety and distress. We would like staff to move from compliance-based methods to relational methods for supporting children. We would like to see better understanding that behaviour is a form of communication and the use of trauma informed practices.

Many of our children are neurodiverse and the environment needs to feel safe, with calm trusted adults to help them co-regulate their nervous systems. School environments are pressured and many adults in school are stressed themselves. We would advocate for a reform that prioritises the health and wellbeing of all staff and students.

Right Time

Timeliness of support is key. Many parents state that the help their child received was "Too little, too late" and support was not forthcoming until their child's attendance started to drop or had stopped completely. Whilst the focus in the SEN Reform Agenda is on Early Years and children aged 3-8 years, this is missing the point that early intervention needs to be applied at the point when a child is starting to experience difficulties no matter what age they are. For a lot of our children and young people, they may start to experience difficulties at ages 7/8 when school work becomes more focused, at age 11 as the pressure from transfer test preparations increases, at age 12 once they transfer to post primary and ages 12-16+ as they navigate post-primary settings and exams.

Right Place

There is a lack of diversity in educational provision in Northern Ireland. This is not addressed in the SEN Reform Agenda. We would like to see online schools offered as an alternative provision. This is well established in other countries e.g. England (Kings Interhigh, Minerva), Ireland (iScoil) and is evidenced to work well for some children with special educational needs.

There is a lack of alternative provisions for children other than EOTAS. Again, this is not addressed in the SEN Reform Agenda. In England, children may be able to access forest schools or other outdoor learning provisions e.g. farms. In this type of setting, children can improve emotional wellbeing and start to build trusting relationships with educators. In a recent publication by Ofsted ⁽⁶⁾, they noted consistent qualitative improvements in wellbeing along with mixed academic outcomes when alternative provision placements were chosen collaboratively and aligned with the child's needs. This type of provision is a bridge to transition to a more formal learning setting later if that is in the best interests of the child.

There is a lack of flexibility in educational provision in Northern Ireland. The SEN Reform Agenda does not propose any solutions. Whilst it is technically possible to flexi-school here, it is very rare. But if this was more widely possible (with the supporting infrastructure of teaching materials and

workbooks being made available online), this would benefit children. It would be possible to access work at home if children were absent for health reasons (including mental health) and could help maintain attendance by providing rest days.

There is a lack of suitable provision for academically able children who cannot manage mainstream provision. The SEN Reform Agenda does not address this either. Although SPiM are promoted as a way of meeting that need, in practice this is not always a good fit as there are no post-primary SPiMs in grammar schools. Parents report they've been advised that children requiring SPiM classes in KS4 will be directed to vocational qualifications no matter their academic ability missing out on GCSE's. The blend of needs that include high academic ability and aspirations along with social communication, sensory and/or wellbeing need is not addressed in the SEN reform Agenda.

Exceptional Teaching Arrangements (ETA) provides 4.5 hours teaching support/week at home or in the community for children who are clinically unable to attend school. Communication with the Department of Education ⁽⁷⁾, states that this is of short-term duration (six-weeks maximum) and is not suitable for children who are not able to attend school due to distress and anxiety. The SEN Reform Agenda does not include anything to fill this lack of educational provision for children who cannot access school and are deemed not suitable for ETA.

Conclusions

Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that 'Every child has the right to an education'. Children with EBSA/ABSA/EBSNA or school distress are either not accessing education or at very high risk of this happening. We would like to see meaningful additions to the SEN Reform agenda put in place to help our children access education and thrive in school.

We look forward to continuing this dialogue with the Education Committee.

Contact us

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References:

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- 2: Fisher, E, MacLennan, K, Mullally, S, Rodgers, J & Tzemou, E (2025), 'I Can't Go to School, It Isn't a Won't': Lived Experiences of Neurodivergent Children's School Anxiety Within the UK's Systemic Crisis', *Neurodiversity*, vol. 3. <https://doi.org/10.1177/27546330251385325>
- 3: Connolly SE, Constable HL and Mullally SL (2023) School distress and the school attendance crisis: a story dominated by neurodivergence and unmet need. *Front. Psychiatry* 14:1237052. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1237052
- 4: Bunting et al (2020) cited in School Anxiety and Distress - A Best Practice Guide for Schools (2025), Children in Northern Ireland
- 5: Response to the SEN Reform Agenda and Delivery Plan 2025-2030 (2025), Partnership for Inclusive Education.

6: Ofsted (2024) Alternative Provision in Local Areas of England: A Thematic Review. London: Ofsted.

7: Meeting with Department of Education representatives and EBSA Support Group, Newcastle (October 2025).