



The challenges of recruiting for SEND roles

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Recruiting for mainstream teachers is a challenge, but what about for special educational needs and disability (SEND) roles? Matt Taylor discusses some of the issues facing schools recruiting in this area, as well as some tips for retaining great SEND teachers

Schools across the UK are currently in the midst of a recruitment and retention crisis, with low numbers of candidates and teacher trainees. Applications for teaching training courses fell by one-third last year – plummeting from 19,330 in December 2016 to just 12,820 in 2017, according to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service. Additionally, high numbers of teachers are leaving the profession – 81 per cent of teachers surveyed by the National Education Union (NEU, 2018) said they had considered leaving the profession in the last year.

The teacher shortage across the UK is affecting both mainstream and SEND schools. According to the Department for Education's 2017 statistics, 14 per cent of pupils – 1.2 million – have special needs or disability with the most common types of needs being learning difficulties (25 per cent) and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (almost 27 per cent). Nearly a quarter of these children are not in school (NEU 2018) and this year, 8,000 SEND children across the UK did not have a school place.

To thrive in a learning environment, these children require smaller class sizes and often individualised lessons. Some may need additional one-on-one support and teaching assistants (TAs) – provision which is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to provide in the midst of a recruitment and retention crisis. Within SEND, there are specialisations – and finding teachers who specialise in certain areas or have particular training can be a further challenge for schools recruiting for such roles.

Attracting more SEND teachers

So what can schools do to attract more SEND teachers into these important positions which support some of the most vulnerable members of society?

Firstly, more clearly defined routes into SEND teaching are imperative – such routes exist in mainstream education but, unfortunately, are not as well defined in SEND teaching. Unlike becoming a teacher in a mainstream setting, there is currently no postgraduate special needs teacher training route to prepare teachers for working in a SEND school. Specific training programmes should be set up to cater to those who want to go into SEND teaching – the pathway into this area of teaching needs to become simpler and more direct in order to draw in and keep more candidates; we speak with countless candidates who are interested in becoming SEND teachers but find the current pathway convoluted.

For both mainstream and SEND roles, the inability of schools to offer competitive starting salaries is a further challenge to recruitment in this area. For example, a Physics graduate with an interest in SEND education would receive a much higher graduate salary using her/his skill set in an alternative profession. A redress in starting salaries for teachers across the board – both in mainstream and SEND – would help to attract, and retain, a higher number of candidates.

Dealing with emotional extremes

At a structural and management level, there are many key processes and measures schools can implement to support and retain valuable SEND teachers. For example, schools could introduce a robust appraisal system; offer your staff professional development opportunities and external training; provide mentoring opportunities, and foster a school culture of openness and understanding.

Further to this, in SEND, emotional extremes are heightened. SEND teachers are often working with pupils who have more challenging behaviour, which can often take an emotional toll. Access to the right support, such as providing a counsellor on-site for staff to offload to is a valuable addition to your school's offering. Providing adequate TA support within the classroom is also extremely important in SEND schools: children who have profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) will often have one-to-one support, and ensuring that SEND teachers are adequately supported with TAs is crucial in minimising workload pressure and retaining staff.

What to look out for

From a school's perspective, here are some key competencies of great SEND teachers to look out for. Firstly, there is creativity. The very best SEND teachers can adapt their lesson plans and style to suit their pupils as teaching children with SEND isn't a 'one size fits all' strategy. To have the ability to adapt to the situations constantly thrown at you in a SEND environment is important.

Another important trait is intuition. Some children will find it hard to express themselves and their emotions and so a SEND teacher might encounter issues with communication. They have to possess the skills to detect any background issues and be able to tackle them before they manifest into something bigger.

Patience is another virtue in a SEND teacher. There will be bad days, sad days, testing days and trying days. There will be days when it feels like nothing goes to plan, and days when it seems as if everything has gone wrong. A good SEND teacher maintains composure and stays calm and patient in the face of challenges.

Confidence is key

SEND teachers must be sure of themselves, firm in their decision-making, and assured in their manner and delivery. Confidence in themselves, what they can deliver and the difference they

can make to SEND students is vital.

Organisational skills are also important – all pupils need structure to succeed, but it is especially important for SEND children. They often need clear instruction and explanation, and rules and boundaries.

Another good trait to look out for is relationship building skills. As class sizes are smaller as a general rule, the importance of building positive and trusting relationships with students is somewhat heightened in SEND.

Tips for recruiting SEND roles

Have an open mind: don't judge purely on a CV or skill-set – look for desire and enthusiasm. You can teach skills but you can't teach passion.

Be open and honest about the role you are recruiting for and the challenges your school/the role presents to the candidate.

Think outside the box and look for transferrable skills: eg, a candidate may not have specific SEND experience but they might have a background in care. EYFS/KS1 primary teachers also transition well into SLD/PMLD roles.

Conduct a lengthy interview process: let the candidate spend a whole day in the school, teach lessons and speak with staff – this ensures the candidate gets a complete picture of the school and whether or not its values align with their own.

What makes a great SEND teacher?

So how do you know when you've found a great SEND teacher? What makes great teachers (whether mainstream or SEND) are teachers who strive to impact students' lives in a positive way. In SEND, class sizes are smaller and roles can be more challenging but at the same time the emotional reward can be greater. Lastly, there is a perception that SEND teachers just need to get students through the education system but truly great SEND teachers have high expectations of their students and will push them to become the absolute best they can be.

Supply Desk (a division of Education Placement Group) offers specialist support staff to work on a 1:1 or small group basis with pupils who might be disadvantaged, displaying behavioural issues or struggling with their learning. Supply Desk's Special Education Needs and Disability and support specialists will work with individuals or groups of pupils for an agreed period to improve outcomes.