Department for Education

GCSE Outcomes for Pupils with EHCPs: Mainstream versus Special School Settings

Summary Report

February 2026

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Government Social Research

Contents

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from an analysis of GCSE outcomes for pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), comparing those educated in mainstream schools with those in special schools. The analysis covers thirteen academic years from 2011/12 through 2023/24, using data from the National Pupil Database.

Key finding: After controlling for prior attainment, type of special educational need, and demographic characteristics, pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools achieve on average 0.56 grades higher across their combined English and Maths GCSEs than comparable pupils in special schools. This comparison is based on the 94,927 pupils with EHCPs who took GCSEs between 2011/12 and 2023/24 — representing approximately 22% of all pupils with EHCPs. Among these GCSE-taking pupils, nearly all in mainstream (96.7%) and most in special schools (70.2%) were entered for both English and Maths. This finding is consistent across multiple statistical methods, with estimates ranging from 0.54 to 0.60 grades. Importantly, this comparison controls for prior attainment at Key Stage 2, meaning we are comparing pupils who demonstrated similar academic ability at age 11.

However, this finding requires careful interpretation. The analysis identifies an association, not a causal effect. Pupils are not randomly allocated to school settings; placement decisions reflect individual needs assessments. Special schools serve pupils with the most complex requirements, and our data cannot fully capture severity of need within each SEN category. The observed difference may be partially explained by unmeasured differences in severity of need between pupils in different settings, though sensitivity analyses (E-value = 1.87) suggest the entire effect is unlikely to be solely due to unmeasured confounding.

The mainstream association varies by type of need. It is largest for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (0.68 grades), Physical Disabilities (0.65 grades) and Specific Learning Difficulties (0.63 grades). One possible explanation for the larger SEMH association is that social, emotional and mental health difficulties often emerge or intensify during adolescence, meaning their impact on secondary school outcomes may not be fully captured by prior attainment at Key Stage 2 [1]. It is smallest for pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties and Speech, Language and Communication Needs (both 0.44 grades). These findings hold after accounting for Local Authority variation in EHCP rates and placement patterns through multilevel modelling. Local Authorities vary substantially in both EHCP identification rates and placement decisions, so this analysis helps rule out geographic or local policy differences as explanations for the observed outcomes. This provides additional

[1] See Technical Report, Effects by Primary SEN Type section. Note: All Technical Report section references in this document are provisional and may change in the final published version.

confidence that the results are not entirely explained by unmeasured severity differences between settings [2].

The relationship has changed over time. The mainstream association widened from 0.56 grades pre-2014 to 0.63 grades following the Children and Families Act reforms, before narrowing to 0.47 grades in the post-COVID period. These temporal patterns warrant further investigation.

The post-COVID narrowing — from 0.63 grades pre-pandemic to 0.47 grades post-pandemic — is particularly notable. Whether this reflects lasting changes to the relationship between setting and outcomes, or temporary factors including the use of teacher-assessed grades during the pandemic, remains unclear [3].

Important limitations: This analysis covers only approximately 22% of pupils with EHCPs who take GCSEs (averaging across the 2011/12–2023/24 period). This comprises 73,183 mainstream pupils and 21,744 special school pupils. Findings may not generalise to pupils with the most complex and profound needs. GCSE outcomes represent only one dimension of educational success; for example, support for wellbeing, social development, and life skills are not measured by this analysis. Additionally, changing placement patterns over time — with increasing numbers of pupils with EHCPs in both settings — may affect the composition of each group, potentially explaining some of the temporal variation in estimates[4].

These findings represent averages across a large sample of pupils. They do not provide a basis for individual placement decisions, which must continue to reflect comprehensive assessment of each pupil's needs, circumstances, and the full range of outcomes that matter for their education and development.

[2] See Technical Report, Methodology section.
[3] See Technical Report, Temporal Analysis section.
[4] See Technical Report, Discussion section.

Background

The question of whether pupils with special educational needs achieve better outcomes in mainstream or special school settings has been debated for decades. This debate sits at the intersection of educational philosophy, resource allocation, and individual rights. Different perspectives emphasise inclusion and social integration, specialist provision and expertise, or parental choice and individual circumstances.

Research evidence on this question is mixed and contested. Studies comparing outcomes across settings face a fundamental methodological challenge: pupils are not randomly allocated to schools. Placement decisions reflect assessments of individual needs, parental preferences, and local provision. Any observed difference in outcomes may reflect these selection processes rather than genuine effects of school setting.

International research has examined various outcomes including academic achievement, social development, and post-school transitions. Some studies find advantages for mainstream inclusion, particularly for pupils with milder needs. Others identify benefits of specialist provision, especially for pupils requiring intensive support or modified curricula. The balance of evidence suggests that optimal placement depends on individual circumstances, with no single setting universally superior. For full citations of the research literature,[5].

Within England, the evidence base is limited. Previous analyses have examined point-in-time attainment gaps but have not systematically controlled for the characteristics that drive placement decisions. This creates a significant gap in the evidence available to inform policy and practice.

This analysis addresses that gap by examining GCSE outcomes for pupils with EHCPs across thirteen academic years, using administrative data that allows us to control for prior attainment, type of need, and demographic characteristics. The scale and longitudinal coverage of this analysis exceed previous work, though it shares the fundamental limitation that observational data cannot establish causation.

[5] See Technical Report, Bibliography section.

Policy context

The 2014 Reforms

The Children and Families Act 2014 represented the most significant reform to special educational needs provision in a generation. The Act replaced Statements of Special Educational Needs with Education, Health and Care Plans, extending coverage from birth to age 25 and requiring coordinated assessment across education, health, and social care.

The reforms emphasised a presumption of mainstream education where appropriate, whilst recognising that some pupils require specialist provision. Local authorities were required to publish a Local Offer setting out available support, and parents gained enhanced rights to request particular schools, including academies and free schools.

Implementation of these reforms coincided with significant growth in EHCP numbers. The number of pupils with EHCPs in schools increased from approximately 223,000 in 2015/16 to over 400,000 by 2023/24.[6] This growth has led to increasing placements in both settings, with a rising proportion of school funding provided by the High Needs Block. Recent reviews have highlighted the need for reform to improve outcomes, experiences, and ensure financial sustainability[7].

Changing Placement Patterns

The distribution of pupils with EHCPs across settings has shifted substantially since 2016. The number of pupils with EHCPs in mainstream settings has grown by approximately 104%, whilst special school numbers have increased by 52%. Mainstream schools have absorbed a larger share of overall EHCP growth, though the percentage of all school pupils who are in special schools has increased from 1.35% in 2015/16 to 1.9% in 2023/24 (source: Explore Education Statistics). This pattern — rising EHCP numbers in both mainstream and special schools with a faster increase in mainstream schools — could reflect genuine increases in needs, lower identification thresholds, capacity constraints, or policy shifts favouring mainstream placement. The analysis cannot distinguish between these explanations[8].

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[6] Covers pupils, as captured by SEN2 in January each year, in state-funded nursery, primary, secondary, special, and alternative provision schools, as well as non-maintained special schools. Source: Special educational needs in England, Academic year 2023/24, Explore Education Statistics (sen_ncyear.csv). Available at: https://content.explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/api/releases/d308bf2b-790e-4a79-8eba-591b25d84d3a/files?fromPage=ReleaseDownloads

[7] See Technical Report, Background section.

[8] See Technical Report, Limitations section.

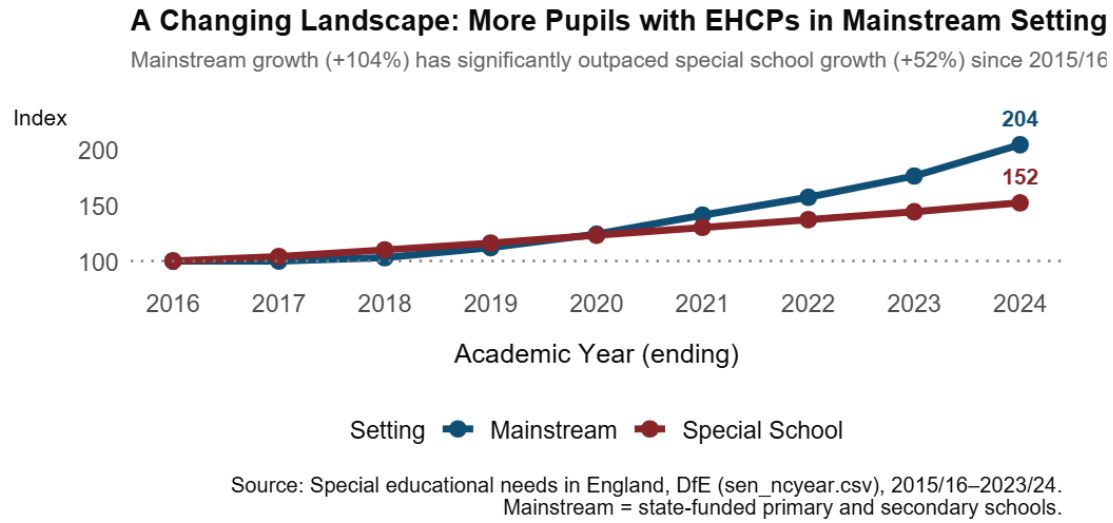

Figure 1: Growth in pupils with EHCPs by setting, indexed to 2015/16. Mainstream growth (+104%) has outpaced special school growth (+52%). (Technical Report, Changing Placement Patterns))

Perhaps more significantly, the profile of pupils in special schools has changed. The fastest growth in special school placements has been among need types historically more commonly educated in mainstream settings.

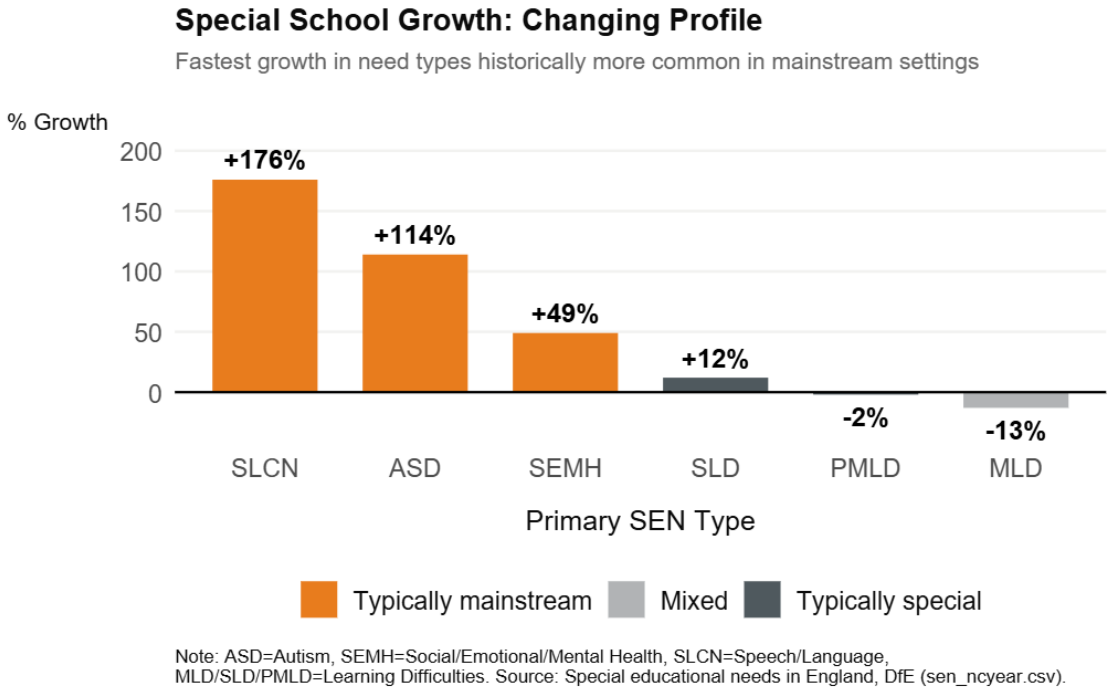

Figure 2: Special school growth by need type (2015/16–2023/24). Growth concentrated in SLCN (+176%), ASD (+114%), and SEMH (+49%). (Technical Report, Background)

Placements for pupils with Speech, Language and Communication Needs have grown by 176%, Autism by 114%, and Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs by 49%. Meanwhile, placements for pupils with Severe Learning Difficulties have grown by only 12%, and the number of special school placements for both Moderate Learning Difficulties and Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties has declined (by 13% and 2% respectively). The changing profile of special school placements is notable. This shifting profile raises questions about whether the composition of need within the EHCP population has changed; however, the analysis cannot determine whether this represents genuine increases in prevalence, changes in how needs are diagnosed, or whether the criteria for receiving an EHCP have shifted over time [9].

This shift suggests changing placement patterns rather than simply increased prevalence of the most severe needs. Pupils with SLCN and autism are increasingly placed in special schools, raising questions about whether these pupils would achieve different outcomes in mainstream settings with appropriate support.[10].

Placement Patterns by Need Type

Understanding how different need types are distributed across settings provides important context for interpreting findings. Placement patterns vary dramatically.

Among all pupils with EHCPs at Key Stage 4 (not just those entered for GCSEs), pupils with Physical Disabilities are overwhelmingly in mainstream (93%), as are those with Visual Impairment (92%) and Hearing Impairment (87%). These pupils typically have cognitive abilities unaffected by their impairment and can access mainstream curriculum with appropriate accommodations, though they still achieve lower on average than non-EHCP peers.

Pupils with Autism show 80% mainstream placement, but this masks wide heterogeneity. Some autistic pupils thrive in mainstream with support; others require the structured environments that special schools provide. Similarly, pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties show 82% mainstream placement.

Pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs show a mainstream rate of 61%, among the lowest for need types commonly represented in our GCSE sample. Pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties have far lower mainstream rates but are rarely entered for GCSEs. The relatively high special school placement rate for pupils with SEMH needs, combined with the largest mainstream association for this group, raises important questions about whether appropriate mainstream support could improve outcomes for some of these pupils.

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[9] See Technical Report, Limitations section.
[10] See Technical Report, Background section.

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created unprecedented disruption to education. School closures during 2020 and 2021 affected all pupils, but impacts may have differed by setting.

GCSE examinations were cancelled in both 2020 and 2021, replaced by Centre Assessed Grades and Teacher Assessed Grades respectively. These alternative assessment approaches may have affected pupils in different settings differently, complicating interpretation of outcomes during and immediately after the pandemic period.

Our analysis excludes the 2019/20 cohort (centre-assessed grades) but includes subsequent cohorts when examinations resumed. The impact of the pandemic on the relationship between setting and outcomes is examined in the Changes Over Time section below.

Methodology

Data Sources

This analysis uses the National Pupil Database, the comprehensive administrative dataset covering all pupils in state-funded schools in England. The NPD includes pupil-level information on attainment, characteristics, and school attended, linked across academic years through anonymised pupil identifiers.

Our analysis sample comprises 94,927 pupils with EHCPs (or predecessor Statements) who took at least one GCSE between academic years 2011/12 and 2023/24. This represents approximately 77% of pupils with EHCPs who took GCSEs during this period, and approximately 22% of all pupils with EHCPs at GCSE age. The remaining 78% were not entered for GCSEs in English and/or Maths or lacked the KS2 prior attainment data required for our analysis[11]. Entry rates differ substantially by setting: approximately 45% of pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools are entered for GCSEs in English and Maths, compared to only 8% in special schools[12].

The primary outcome measure is average GCSE grade across Maths and English, standardised to the 1-9 grading scale introduced in 2017. Prior attainment is measured using Key Stage 2 assessment scores in Maths and Reading, standardised within each cohort to enable comparisons across the 2017 GCSE grading reform (A*-G to 9-1) and account for year-to-year variation[13]. The analysis also controls for KS2 school type, distinguishing pupils by educational pathway (e.g., always mainstream, always special, or those who moved between settings).[14]

Analytical Approach

The central challenge in comparing outcomes across school settings is selection bias. Pupils are not randomly allocated to mainstream and special schools; placement reflects individual needs assessments. If pupils in special schools have more severe needs, observed outcome differences may reflect these underlying differences rather than effects of school setting.

We address this challenge through statistical adjustment, controlling for observable characteristics that predict both placement and outcomes. Our models include prior attainment (KS2 Maths and Reading scores), primary type of special educational need, age when Statement/EHCP was first recorded (a proxy for severity; [15]), gender,

[11] See Technical Report, Sample Selection section.
[12] See Technical Report, GCSE Entry Patterns section.
[13] See Technical Report, Appendix F.
[14] See Technical Report, Educational Pathway Controls section.
[15] See Technical Report, Variable Definitions section.

Free School Meal eligibility, ethnicity, and neighbourhood deprivation (IDACI quintile). Crucially, controlling for prior attainment means we are comparing pupils who demonstrated similar academic ability at age 11. For unmeasured severity to fully explain our findings, placement decisions would need to accurately predict future academic progress based on factors not captured by our full set of controls — including prior attainment, age at first Statement/EHCP (a proxy for severity), and primary SEN type — a demanding assumption[16].

To test robustness, we employ multiple analytical methods with different assumptions. Our primary approach is multilevel modelling, which accounts for pupils being grouped within schools and local authorities. We supplement this with propensity score matching, entropy balancing, coarsened exact matching, and difference-in-differences analysis exploiting the 2014 reforms. The consistency of findings across methods strengthens confidence in our conclusions.

Quality Assurance

This analysis has undergone quality assurance consistent with Government Statistical Service standards (https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/). The analytical code has been reviewed by analysts within the DfE, and detailed technical reports have been reviewed by members of the DfE Science Advisory Council, including external review by Professor Mark Mon-Williams, for external scrutiny.

A detailed Technical Report accompanies this summary, providing full model specifications, diagnostic tests, and sensitivity analyses. Readers requiring methodological detail should consult that document.

Limitations

Several important limitations should be noted. First, we cannot establish causation. Our methods control for observed characteristics, including prior attainment at Key Stage 2 and age at first SEN identification, but cannot account for all unmeasured differences between pupils.[17].

Second, we measure only academic outcomes. GCSEs capture one dimension of educational success. Different settings may offer different strengths in areas such as wellbeing, social development, and life skills that our analysis does not capture.

Third, our sample covers only pupils who were entered for GCSEs. Findings may not generalise to the majority of pupils with EHCPs who were not entered for GCSEs in English and/or Maths. Furthermore, our analysis examines only grades in English and

[16] See Technical Report, Limitations and Interpretation section.
[17] See Technical Report, Sensitivity Analysis for Unmeasured Confounding section.

Maths, not the total number of GCSEs entered. Pupils in special schools typically enter fewer GCSEs overall, representing an additional dimension of attainment not captured here.

Findings

The SEND Attainment Context

Before presenting our main findings, it is important to establish the broader context of SEND attainment. Across our analysis period, pupils without SEND achieved an average GCSE grade of 5.2 across all subjects, whilst pupils with any form of SEND achieved an average grade of 2.8 across all subjects. This gap of 2.4 grades reflects the genuine barriers to learning that pupils with special educational needs face. Our analysis focuses specifically on English and Maths outcomes.

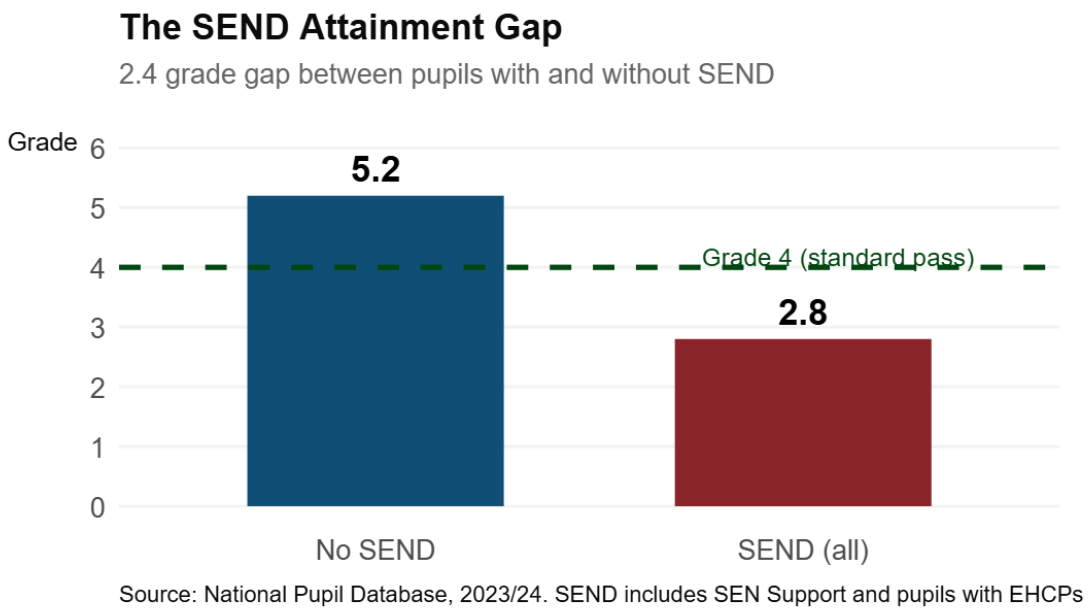

Figure 3: The SEND attainment gap. Pupils with SEND an average grade of 2.4 below pupils without SEND. (Technical Report, Context)

Within the SEND population, outcomes vary substantially by level of provision. Pupils receiving SEN Support (school-based provision without a statutory plan) achieved an average grade of 3.4. Pupils with EHCPs achieved an average grade of 2.4, reflecting their more significant needs. The Grade 4 threshold, representing a standard pass, sits above both averages, indicating that pupils in both groups typically fall below the standard pass.

Attainment also varies markedly by type of need. Pupils with sensory and physical impairments (Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment, Physical Disability) achieve the highest average grades among pupils with EHCPs, often close to or above the Grade 4 threshold. However, even these groups remain below the non-SEND an average grade of 5.2, and primary SEN type classification may not fully capture the complexity of needs for pupils with multiple difficulties. Pupils with learning difficulties (Moderate,

Severe, and Profound Learning Difficulties) achieve lower grades, reflecting the direct impact of their needs on academic learning.

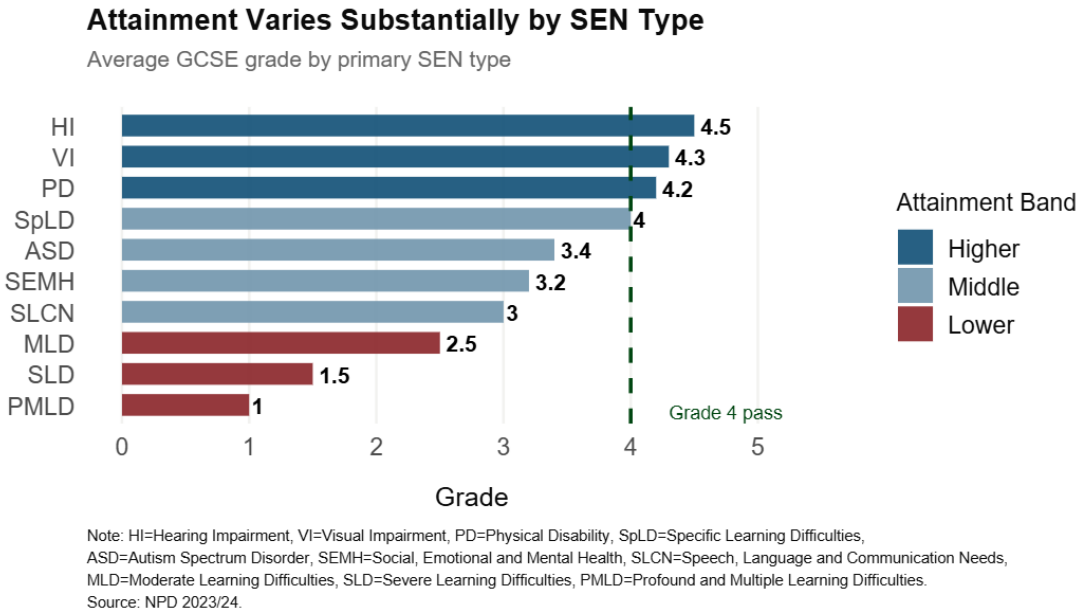

Figure 4: Attainment varies substantially by type of need, from 4.5 grades (HI) to 1.0 grade (PMLD). (Technical Report, Context)

Unadjusted Differences by Setting

Looking at raw outcomes by school setting, among pupils with EHCPs who were entered for GCSEs, those in mainstream schools achieved an average grade of 3.5 in English and Maths, whilst those in special schools achieved an average grade of 2.9. This unadjusted difference of 0.6 grades is noticeable but must be interpreted with extreme caution.

The raw difference tells us nothing about whether mainstream placement would lead to better outcomes for each pupil. Pupils are not randomly allocated to settings. Special schools are intended to serve pupils with the most complex needs, those whose requirements cannot be met in mainstream provision. The observed difference largely reflects this compositional difference rather than any effect of school setting itself.

Adjusted Findings: The Main Result

After controlling for prior attainment, type of need, and demographic characteristics, we find that pupils in mainstream schools achieve on average 0.56 grades higher in English and Maths (combined) than comparable pupils in

special schools. This estimate comes from our multilevel model, with a 95% confidence interval of 0.52 to 0.61 grades.

Notably, the adjusted estimate (0.56 grades) is remarkably similar to the raw difference (0.6 grades), suggesting that observable characteristics explain relatively little of the outcome difference within this EHCP population. This may reflect the relative homogeneity of pupils who have both EHCPs and take GCSEs—by restricting to this group, we have already implicitly controlled for much of the variation in prior attainment and severity.

Critically, this is an association, not proven causation. We cannot say that mainstream placement would benefit any specific pupil. Unmeasured differences between pupils, particularly severity of need within each SEN category, likely explain some portion of this difference. The estimate represents the average outcome difference between pupils in different settings who appear similar on measured characteristics.

Variation by Type of Need

The mainstream association varies substantially across different types of special educational need. This variation is important for understanding where the relationship between setting and outcomes may be strongest or weakest.

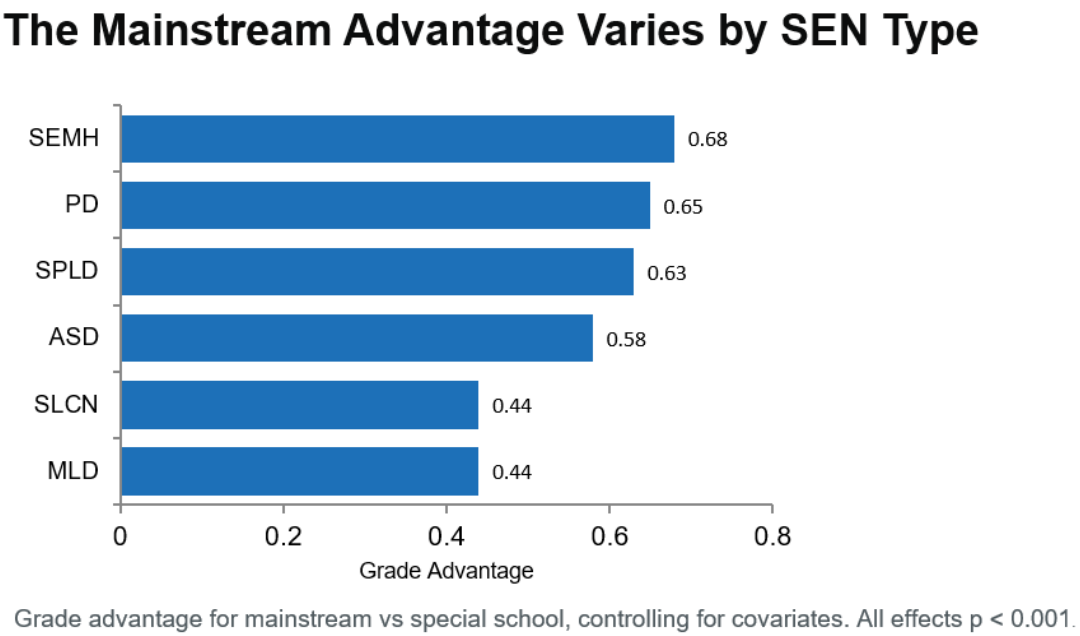

Figure 5: The mainstream association varies by SEN type, from 0.68 grades (SEMH) to 0.44 grades (MLD, SLCN). (Technical Report, Effects by SEN Type)

Largest associations: Pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs show the largest mainstream association at 0.68 grades. This may reflect benefits from

structured mainstream environments, peer role models, and higher academic expectations. Alternatively, it may reflect stronger selection effects, with pupils with more moderate SEMH needs placed in mainstream.

Pupils with Physical Disabilities show 0.65 grades, consistent with the fact that physical impairments typically do not affect cognitive ability. Pupils with Specific Learning Difficulties (including dyslexia) show an estimated difference of 0.63 grades. These pupils often have general cognitive abilities that allow them to access mainstream curriculum with appropriate support.

Smallest associations: Pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties and Speech, Language and Communication Needs both show estimated differences of 0.44 grades. These needs may more directly affect learning processes, meaning that specialist pedagogy in special schools provides greater compensating value.

Pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the largest group in our sample at 31%, show an estimated difference of 0.58 grades, close to the overall average. The wide heterogeneity within autism means this average masks considerable variation; some autistic pupils thrive in mainstream with support, whilst others benefit from special schools' structured environments and lower sensory demands.

All associations are statistically significant. However, confidence intervals overlap substantially across need types, so we cannot conclude definitively that these differences are real rather than sampling variation. The pattern is suggestive but requires replication[18].

Consistency Across Methods

A strength of this analysis is the consistency of findings across different statistical methods. Each method makes different assumptions and uses different approaches to address selection bias.

[18] See Technical Report, Effects by Primary SEN Type section.

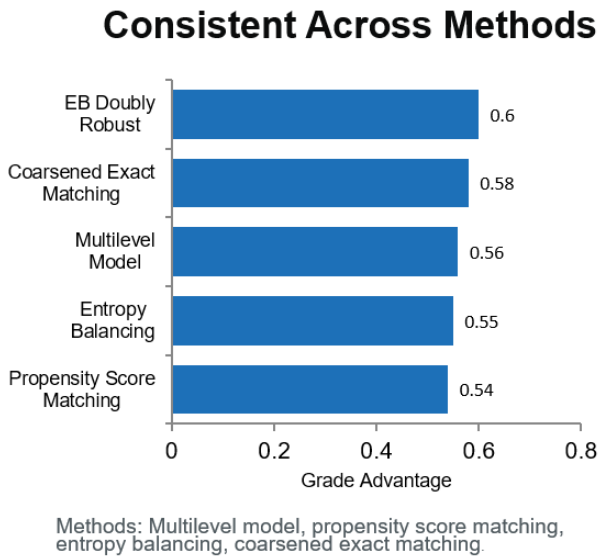

Figure 6: Estimates are consistent across statistical methods, ranging from 0.54 to 0.60 grades. (Technical Report, Methodology Comparison)

Propensity score matching, which creates comparison groups of mainstream and special school pupils with similar predicted probability of mainstream placement, yields an estimate of 0.54 grades. Entropy balancing, which reweights the special school sample to match the mainstream sample on observable characteristics, yields 0.55 grades. Coarsened exact matching yields 0.58 grades, and doubly robust entropy balancing yields 0.60 grades.

This convergence across methods, with estimates ranging only from 0.54 to 0.60 grades, strengthens confidence that the association is robust. If results varied wildly across methods, we would have less confidence in any single estimate. The consistency suggests the pattern is real and not an artefact of any particular analytical choice.

However, convergence does not establish causation. All methods share the same fundamental limitation: they can only control for measured characteristics. If unmeasured severity drives both placement and outcomes, all methods will be affected by this confounding. Methodological triangulation provides confidence in the association whilst respecting its limitations.

Changes Over Time

The relationship between school setting and GCSE outcomes appears to have varied over the analysis period, though as with variation by SEN type, confidence intervals overlap across periods. Examining estimates by policy period reveals patterns that warrant further investigation.

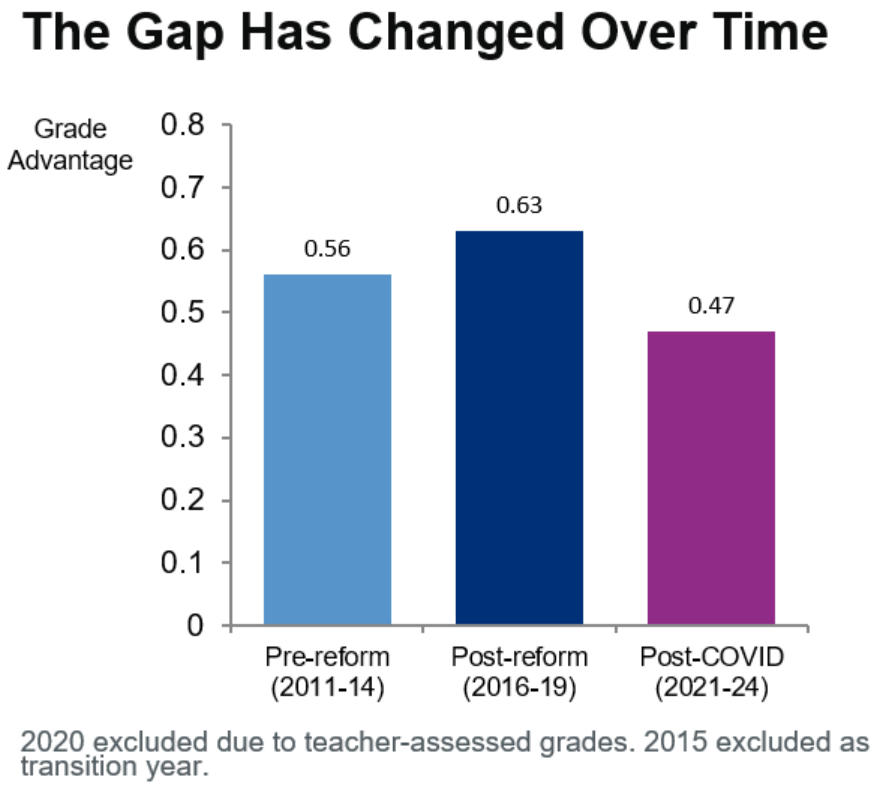

Figure 7: The mainstream association has changed over time: widening post-reform, then narrowing post-COVID. (Technical Report, Temporal Analysis)

Pre-reform period (2011-2014): Before the Children and Families Act reforms took effect, the mainstream association was 0.56 grades. This provides a baseline against which subsequent changes can be assessed.

Post-reform period (2016-2019): Following implementation of the 2014 reforms, the association widened to 0.63 grades, an increase of approximately 12%. Several mechanisms could explain this widening. The reforms may have strengthened mainstream support for pupils with EHCPs, improving their outcomes. Alternatively, changing placement patterns may have altered the composition of pupils in each setting, though the extent to which this affects the comparison is unclear.

Post-COVID period (2021-2024): Most recently, the association has narrowed to 0.47 grades, falling below pre-reform levels. This represents a substantial change from the post-reform period and requires careful interpretation.

The post-COVID narrowing could reflect several factors. The pandemic may have affected settings differently, with lasting impacts on teaching and learning. Changing placement patterns, with more pupils whose needs might previously have been met in mainstream now attending special schools, could mechanically reduce the observed

association. Assessment practices may have shifted. The challenge is that multiple forces operated simultaneously, making it difficult to isolate specific mechanisms.

These temporal patterns reinforce a critical point: the magnitude of the relationship between setting and outcomes is not fixed. It varies with policy context, pupil composition, and external circumstances. This argues against interpreting our overall estimate as reflecting a stable, universal effect of school setting.

Summary and discussion

What This Analysis Shows

This analysis provides the most comprehensive examination to date of GCSE outcomes for pupils with EHCPs across mainstream and special school settings in England. The key findings are:

First, after controlling for observable characteristics, notably prior attainment at KS2, pupils in mainstream schools achieve approximately half a grade higher on average in English and Maths GCSEs than comparable pupils in special schools. This association is consistent across multiple analytical methods.

Second, the association varies by type of need, ranging from 0.44 grades for pupils with Moderate Learning Difficulties to 0.68 grades for pupils with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs. This heterogeneity suggests the relationship between setting and outcomes differs across the SEND population.

Third, the relationship has changed over time, widening after the 2014 reforms and narrowing post-COVID. These temporal patterns indicate that context matters and that the association is not stable.

Fourth, the findings are robust across analytical approaches but cannot establish causation. Unmeasured differences between pupils, particularly severity of need, likely explain some portion of the observed association.

What This Analysis Cannot Show

Equally important is clarity about what this analysis does not and cannot demonstrate.

We cannot prove that mainstream placement causes better academic outcomes. The observed association may reflect selection processes that place pupils with less severe needs in mainstream settings. Our statistical methods control for measured characteristics but cannot account for unmeasured severity within each SEN category.

We cannot measure non-academic outcomes. GCSEs capture one dimension of educational success. Support for wellbeing, mental health, social development, life skills, and preparation for adulthood are not considered by this analysis. Any academic advantage must therefore be weighed alongside these broader outcomes.

We cannot generalise to all pupils with EHCPs. Our analysis covers only the 22% of pupils with EHCPs who have both valid KS2 prior attainment data and GCSE entries

in English and/or Maths[19]. The majority have needs too complex for standard academic assessment, and our findings do not apply to them. Furthermore, the analysis cannot account for potential differences in GCSE entry policies between settings—as noted above, approximately 45% of pupils with EHCPs in mainstream schools are entered for GCSEs in English and Maths, compared to only 8% in special schools. This 37-percentage point gap means our analysis necessarily excludes pupils with more complex needs who pursue alternative qualifications. This differential entry pattern creates selection bias that, if anything, favours special schools in the comparison by excluding pupils who would likely have lower GCSE outcomes.

We cannot determine optimal placement for any individual pupil. Population-level associations do not translate directly to individual decisions. Each pupil's circumstances are unique, and placement decisions must reflect comprehensive assessment of individual needs, not statistical averages.

Implications

The post-reform widening of the association warrants investigation, as does the post-COVID narrowing. The variation by need type suggests that different approaches may be appropriate for different groups of pupils.

These findings do not provide a basis for changing placement decisions for individual pupils. Placement must continue to reflect comprehensive assessment of each child's needs, strengths, and circumstances. The analysis indicates that, on average and after controlling for measured characteristics, mainstream placement is associated with better GCSE outcomes. But individual pupils vary enormously around any average, and academic outcomes are only one consideration among many.

These findings should inform discussion, not determine decisions for individual pupils. They provide useful evidence for policy debate whilst respecting the complexity of educational placement decisions and the limitations of what observational data can demonstrate.

Contact: SENDAP Data Analysis Team, Department for Education

Date: February 2026

[19] See Technical Report, Figure 7 Sample Funnel.

Department for Education

Reference: RR1608
ISBN: 978-1-83870-753-8

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