



**Inclusion
in Practice**

Case Study:

Dixons Academy Trust





Background information

Trust: Dixons Academies Trust

Director of SEND and Safeguarding: Nicole Dempsey

About the trust: Dixons Academies Trust began with Dixons City Academy, which was established in Bradford in 1990. Today, Dixons is made up of 11 secondaries, three primaries, two all-through academies and one college, across Bradford, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester. Dixons' mission is to challenge educational and social disadvantage in the North of England. It therefore chooses to open schools in challenging urban areas, and takes on schools in particularly difficult circumstances.

SEN pupils: 20% SEN pupils (secondary) and 21% (primary)

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 45% (secondary) and 34% (primary).

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 26% (secondary) and 48% (primary)

MAT Progress 8 score: +0.11

Key stage 2: 56% of pupils meeting expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2

Data has been taken from <https://www.gov.uk/school-performance-tables> at time of publication (July 2025) and updated with trusts as needed for accuracy. Definitions of categories are also available through the same site.



Why is this important?

When Nicole Dempsey arrived for her interview as Senco at Dixons Trinity, she told senior leaders that there's no such thing as children with SEND – there are only children. She said it was possible to design an inclusive school that did not resort to segregated systems and two-tier teaching.

Instead of providing one-to-one support and small-group interventions led by a teaching assistant, Ms Dempsey argued for additional teachers and double staffing. And she would not be the Senco, she added: she would be the Inco – the individual needs coordinator.

“We’ve got this situation where we have this group of children we call SEND, like it’s a type of child,” says Ms Dempsey, now Dixons Director of SEND and Safeguarding. “And it absolutely isn’t.

“We’ve got a situation where schools can measure their inclusivity by how big their SEND department is, how many teaching assistants they have or how many dedicated spaces. But these are signs of internal segregation, not real inclusion.”

At Dixons Trinity, therefore, she set out to show what real inclusion could look like.



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Nicole Dempsey, Dixons Director of SEND and Safeguarding





What challenges were you trying to address?

When Dixons Trinity Academy was established, in 2012, its founding members of staff were aware that they had been presented with a real opportunity. Dixons Trinity was a start-up free school: there was no blueprint. Staff could therefore choose not to perpetuate the systems that were prevalent across the sector, which they believed were failing pupils with SEND.

“Part of the opportunity that came with Trinity was a commitment to really hiring on values and mission alignment,” says Jenny Thompson, School and College Trust Leader at Dixons. “So we had a cohort of colleagues who were aligned. There was a commonality of predisposition.”

Once Ms Dempsey was in post, the team began to ask themselves a series of challenging questions: what does real inclusion look like? How do we achieve high-quality outcomes? Every child has the right to a high-quality education with a teacher and robust standards and expectations, they argued. But, equally, all children have the right to the individual support that’s often reserved for children with SEND.

“I was looking at the research, looking at the evidence,” Ms Dempsey says, “but mostly just doing a little bit of soul searching. What would our standard be for our children? And then setting up or designing something on the basis of that, as opposed to received wisdoms and bad habits.”

What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

The approach:

The origin of Mountain Rescue – the name began as a joke, playing on the fact that Dixons Trinity pupils are encouraged to “climb the mountain to university” – was the desire to eliminate segregation. And therefore, Ms Dempsey argued, there should be no SEND department, because a SEND department could be seen as a form of segregation.

Instead, they would create an all-encompassing pastoral department. There, senior leaders for SEND, safeguarding and behaviour would lead a multidisciplinary team in a shared departmental space. “And just really banging on about it all the time so that no one could have any kind of doubt what we were intending,” says Ms Dempsey.

There were other hard lines, too: there would be no teaching assistants – “Or teaching assistants by any other name,”

says Ms Dempsey. “No learning mentors or learning support assistants.” Instead, teaching is the exclusive domain of teachers. And the school uses key workers, counsellors and mentors – none of whom have anything to do with teaching or learning.

Each member of staff only does the job for which they are specifically trained. So counselling is provided by a counsellor. Mentors, following what Ms Dempsey describes as “a Jiminy Cricket model”, will come into a lesson with a child, give them a pep talk and then tell them they will return in five or 10 minutes. “As opposed to having someone velcroed to you socially and developmentally – that also creates a barrier between the child and the teacher,” she says.

The final veto was on withdrawal from lessons: every child belonged in the lesson, all the time. Of course, there would be times when a child might need

to step outside the lesson for a moment – but the only reason to leave would be in order to facilitate their return. And leaving the lesson should always feel like a last resort.

But if the aim is to have all children in the lesson all the time, then the design and structure of that lesson needs to facilitate that aim. And that was where double staffing and flexible grouping came into play.



What does it look like in practice?

The gold standard of flexible grouping was double staffing – and this was how Dixons Trinity began. Each year group would have an additional teacher timetabled every lesson, so that no child needing intervention or group work would be deprived of instruction from a qualified teacher.

However, as schools have increasingly struggled with recruitment and retention, as well as budget restrictions, this model has become less and less practical. “We have to unfortunately operate within the realms of reality, it turns out,” Ms Dempsey says.

So they broadened and found ways to be innovative with the approach – double staffing became only one of several forms of flexible grouping that the school used to ensure that all children should always be working with a qualified teacher.

For example, flexible grouping could involve rethinking how two classes of 30 children, each with a qualified teacher, are divided. Instead of each teacher working with 30 children, it may be that one teacher teaches 49 children, and the other teacher works with a group of 11.





What does it look like in practice? (continued)

What's vital for this to work, says Ms Thompson, is that this is not seen as a deficit model for the 49 children being taught by a single teacher. "So we have to set it up so that the 49 are going to get something equitable with what they would have got in their class of 30," she says. "Or actually it's enhancing what they get, because what we can do is we can put our strongest teacher in front of those 49 children, for whom accessing that is golden."

The 11 children, meanwhile, are given a bespoke small-group intervention, led by a teacher. This may be because they need extra teaching to understand a topic. Or it may be a group of children whose attendance is less consistent, being given small-group tuition to alleviate the barrier of lost learning. But, equally, they could be gifted mathematicians who are being given additional work to stretch them – the aim is that neither group should be seen as a deficit option.

Being able to work with that larger group takes real skill: the teacher needs to be able to hold 50 children's attention, check understanding and ensure engagement. This means that the teachers who work with the larger groups are among the best in the school. And if that large-group teaching is the best offer available, then that is where the school would prefer its children with SEND to be.

What does it look like in practice? (continued)

“The assumption is that children with SEND wouldn’t be able to cope with that group,” says Ms Dempsey. “But that is absolutely where they need to be.”

Children with a learning need – such as dyslexia – can be provided with the technology and equipment that allows them to learn in the mainstream classroom. And if their additional need is to do with cognition and learning, then the trust’s view is that they are the ones who need to be in the main lesson – and making it work for them is part of the skill of the teacher.

“There’s no column for SEND adaptation on our schemes of work on our curriculum materials,” says Ms Thompsen. “Because either your lessons are for all the children or they aren’t.

We don’t write our lesson plan and then think, ‘How can I change this to be right for the children?’ We just write it from that perspective.”

Is flexible grouping Mountain Rescue, then? The term “Mountain Rescue” itself is used to describe the physical space where the Senco, designated safeguarding lead and pastoral leads have their desks. But, says Ms Dempsey, it is also a mindset.

“There are two intertwining branches of the same tree,” she says. “On one side, we’ve got the quality of education: the teaching and learning offer, the timetable, the classroom, the teachers and the adaptivity.

“And then, on the other side, we’ve got pastoral, which for us is the

multidisciplinary team we call Mountain Rescue. That is the support and provision and bespokeness that is offered on a child-by-child basis.”

Those two different branches must necessarily support and inform each other – the multidisciplinary team knows what to provide because it understands what is happening in the classroom. Its members are aware which children are thriving and which are struggling, just as they are aware which teachers are at the start of their career, and so may need additional support.

“The quality of education is ultimately why we exist,” says Ms Dempsey. “We don’t exist to provide pastoral support. We exist to provide learning and education.”

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Nicole Dempsey, Dixons Director of SEND and Safeguarding

What has been the impact?

Dixons Cottingley, one of the trust's Bradford secondaries, opened its Mountain Rescue unit last academic year. In 2024, it had a Progress 8 score of +0.65 – the highest the school has ever achieved. Its SEND data was also positive – 0.03 – for the first time since the school had opened in 2018. School leaders attribute this solely to the decision to move towards a Mountain Rescue-style approach to inclusion.

Almost 50 per cent of disadvantaged pupils at Dixons Cottingley achieved a grade 5 or above in english and maths at GCSE – significantly higher than almost every other school in Bradford. And 75 per cent achieved a grade 4 or above in english and maths.

Students refer to Mountain Rescue as a space where all students – regardless of need – can go for help and support. They say that they use the space when they feel stressed, and it helps them to make the right choices. They have noted a reduction in fixed-term exclusions as a result of Mountain Rescue.





What are the key factors involved in making it successful?

All schools are likely to say that they're inclusive. All schools are likely to say that they value children with SEND. All schools want to prioritise their most vulnerable pupils.

But terms such as “SEND”, “inclusion” or “collaboration” can be slightly nebulous, and so tend to mean different things to different people. What Dixons has learnt over time, therefore, is to codify what it means by the terms it uses to what Ms Thompson describes as “an almost impossibly granular degree”.

These codifications not only define the terms, but base it in the reality of the school or the classroom: this is what it will look like when it's iterated in a lesson, in a conversation with a child or in a discussion with an adult. The aim is always to exemplify what they mean as clearly and unequivocally as possible.

Mountain Rescue teams share common definitions and understanding, but they also share the ethos and the vision underlying these definitions. Much of what makes Mountain Rescue work comes back to the staff sharing a strong desire to do things differently.

For example, flexible grouping is unequivocally a logistically inconvenient model. “In a school where things are big and complex and there are always a hundred things going on, it's hard to be seduced by something that is functionally inconvenient,” says Ms Thompson. “I've got to rewrite a document or I've got to tell the kids, or I've got to make a

What are the key factors involved in making it successful? (continued)

couple of phone calls, or I've got to have a conversation instead of acting unilaterally."

What makes Mountain Rescue – and flexible grouping in particular – work well is that staff are willing to put up with inconvenience. "So much of what we do was and continues to be about embracing the inconvenience for the long-term reward for the kids," says Ms Thompson.

There is also a commitment across the trust to pushing power down the staffing hierarchy. If, for example, the only person able to make decisions about timetabling or class structure is the vice-principal of a school, then it becomes much harder to respond flexibly to need. However, if the school has a really strong set of shared and coherent values and priorities, then that responsive timetabling can be done by a head of faculty or even a classroom teacher.

"But that commitment, that trust and that coherence to purpose needs to be really secure to facilitate genuine pushing power down and not abdication of responsibility," says Ms Thompson.

The trust has a specific way of operating the assess-plan-do-review cycle, which has been built into the calendar at trust level, to ensure that all staff are able to fully engage with it. Timetabled face-to-face meetings to review targets and plan next steps are obligatory. As part of their quality assurance, leadership looks for assess-plan-do-review documentation, showing that the cycle is being implemented effectively. Strategies such as flexible grouping and adaptive teaching are just how the trust teaches – not something it does for pupils with additional needs. The assess-plan-do-review process is there to build on that solid foundation for the children who need it.

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Jenny Thompson, Dixons School and College Trust Leader



Advice for school leaders

Real change comes from thinking about how schools design their timetables and their environment, and how they train staff.

This means that, while a school's Senco and designated safeguarding lead may understand the intentions behind the actions, they lack the decision-making power and capital to enforce broader institutional change.

So, two years ago, Dixons decided it would only train Sencos from other schools if the school principal or another senior colleague attended alongside them.

"It was absolutely game-changing in terms of supporting the mindset shift," says Ms Thompson. "It just really helped with that deep, granular, detailed understanding among those colleagues who had the most decision-making capital."

What they hope to do next is to introduce similar training for the wider senior leadership team, and potentially for classroom teachers as well, so that the entire teaching staff can understand what needs to be done.

But, Ms Dempsey points out, the small steps of addressing this school by school or trust by trust are nothing compared with the wide-sweeping change that would result if these issues were addressed as part of NPQ suite of courses for school leaders.

"What we're rolling out is an ethos," she says. "We're not trying to create more Mountain Rescues. We're trying to get schools to understand the reasons why we created Mountain Rescue and to make their decisions on that basis."

"You need a senior leadership team that's highly visible and present and supportive, that's hopefully going to keep as many children in the classroom as possible for as long as possible, most of the time. So when there is an outlier, whether it's for an additional need or a behaviour or something that's happened at home, that can be really, really individual in our response to it – we have the capacity to be really responsive to that."



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Nicole Dempsey, Dixons Director of SEND and Safeguarding

Resources

- [Dixons website](#)
- [Dixons open source](#)
- [Introduction to Dixons open source \(video\)](#)



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