



**Inclusion
in Practice**

Case Study:

River Learning Trust



How River Learning Trust has created an executive role to support school improvement around SEND, including SEMH

A key principle of SEND practice this case study exemplifies:

One way that school trusts can support SEND and inclusion is by creating dedicated, executive leadership capacity on SEND.

At a glance

- River Learning Trust created a Director of Inclusion role, which is a strategic and executive position within the trust's senior leadership team, designed to shape and influence inclusive practice across the trust.
- This role has brought expertise to the trust's senior leadership team, which in turn has created greater clarity on inclusive practice and extra capacity to support schools and help schools think innovatively around SEND.
- This case study exemplifies the school improvement journey at Bayards Hill Primary School, including:
 - Repositioning SEND as central to school improvement
 - Making whole-school improvements to the quality of teaching,
 - Implementing a targeted intervention to complement this, focused on supporting pupils' emotional and social development, and drawing on expertise from the specialist sector.



Background information

The River Learning Trust (RLT) is responsible for 31 schools, including 20 mainstream primary, 10 mainstream secondary and 1 all through Alternative Provision. This includes Bayards Hill Primary School, a one-form entry mainstream school in Oxfordshire.



What challenges were you trying to address?

The shared aim of leaders at RLT and Bayards Hill is to embed evidence-based strategies to ensure every pupil receives consistently high quality teaching, as the foundation for improving pupil outcomes.

Only once these strong foundations are in place, do leaders start to explore targeted interventions to support pupils' needs. These interventions are designed to build on, rather than compensate for, high quality teaching, providing the additional support needed for pupils who require more than the universal offer. Leaders aim to select interventions with proven impact.





What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

The approach:

In September 2021, RLT appointed a Director of Inclusion to shape and influence inclusive practice across RLT. This role involves:

- Working alongside the Directors of Education to support and quality assure inclusive provision, balancing trust-wide priorities with the unique contexts of individual schools.
- Visiting schools to conduct quality assurance, ensuring high quality teaching and identifying areas needing support.
- Holding schools accountable for their performance and taking a hands-on approach in supporting their progress.
- Facilitating the sharing of experiences with various interventions and highlighting the need to address specific pupils' needs effectively.

RLT continues to invest in this area, and the Director of Inclusion is leading and developing an Inclusion team to provide expert advice to schools regarding provision for SEND.

This strategic capacity has enabled RLT to build strong, purposeful partnerships. This includes a collaborative relationship with The Mulberry Bush, a specialist residential setting for children who have experienced early trauma and present with significant SEMH needs.

What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

How the project started:

Leaders at Bayards Hill started by focusing on embedding evidence-based strategies in the school, to ensure that every pupil received consistently high quality teaching. Only once this work led to significant improvements in both behaviour systems and overall teaching practice, did they look at implementing new interventions for specific pupils' needs.

School leaders reviewed the needs of pupils' in their setting. The numbers of pupils with SEND can be found in the table below, including those undergoing an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (EHCNA).

	SEN	EHCPs	EHCNA
Number of pupils	69	25	7
Percentage of pupils on roll	27%	10%	2.8%

The following table sets out the broad area of need for those pupils with SEND.

	Communication and Interaction	Cognition and Learning	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
Number of pupils	39	11	19%
Percentage of SEN pupils with this need	57%	16%	28%





What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

How the project started (continued):

School leaders found that Communication and Interaction is more prevalent in the lower years, but further up the school, Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs are higher. These needs were resulting in many behavioural issues and Emotionally Based School Avoidance, particularly after weekends.

Therefore, one priority for leaders was pupils' emotional and social development. School leaders aimed to nurture a strong sense of right and wrong, build self-awareness, strengthen relationship skills, and support pupils in managing their emotions. By focusing on emotional and social learning, they also aimed to improve behaviour, boost engagement, and increase attendance across the school.

The Director of Inclusion at RLT connected the school leaders with Mulberry Bush School. Mulberry Bush has developed and codified a curriculum specifically designed to support emotional and social learning in mainstream settings, which Bayards Hill decided to implement as an intervention.

What does it look like in practice?

Whole school improvement around inclusion

The Director of Inclusion's role is to build capacity and expertise across schools, to enable whole-school improvement.

The Director of Inclusion provides guidance, advice and training to all Trust staff, including Headteachers, SENDCOs, and senior and middle leaders. This enables SENDCOs to work alongside other senior leaders to ensure curriculums are ambitious and pupils with SEND have access to high quality teaching, irrespective of school size or individual context.

At Bayards Hill, the Quality of Education Lead/SENDCO (Deputy Headteacher), undertook a focused and collaborative school improvement journey by reviewing its core systems to better support high quality teaching for all pupils, including those with SEND. The Headteacher and the school's Support and Challenge Partner were actively involved in the review and implementation process.

The first steps in this journey were to prioritise key policies and procedures that created an inclusive school culture. This included the following:

- 1. Review of the teaching & learning and behaviour policies:** through an inclusive lens. This review explicitly aligned quality first teaching with the needs of pupils with SEND, embedding strategies such as scaffolding, adaptive teaching, as well as the universal design for learning across all subjects in every classroom.
- 2. Refinement of the behaviour policy:** recognising the impact of relational and trauma-informed approaches, the school reviewed its behaviour policy to better reflect its inclusive ethos. The updated policy emphasises proactive regulation, restorative practice, and consistency of a stepped and clear response from all staff.
- 3. Redesign of the Continued Professional Learning and Development programme** to reflect the inclusive priorities and ensure all staff, teachers and support staff receive ongoing training focused on inclusion, adaptive teaching, and SEMH awareness. Sessions are responsive to need, rooted in evidence-based practice, and linked to the school's updated teaching and learning expectations.
- 4. Embedded instructional coaching:** to build consistency and raise the quality of classroom practice, Bayards Hill implemented a model of instructional coaching. Teachers receive individualised, sustained support to improve specific aspects of their practice, with a strong focus on adaptive strategies, clear instruction, and creating inclusive learning environments. Traditional pupil progress meetings were replaced with learning conversations that were structured on the school's coaching model.



What does it look like in practice? (continued)

A targeted intervention for SEMH

The Director of Inclusion identified the *Emotional and Social Curriculum* intervention, created by Mulberry Bush. They had their team trial this in one setting, and following positive feedback, negotiated for a package to make this available to all schools in the trust.

The Director's team organised for training for every school, and for the curriculum to be printed and available to each. Once Bayards Hill decided to implement the intervention, they had a key contact in the Director's team to support with implementation.

Selecting pupils for the intervention

Leaders at Bayards Hill used data to identify pupils with particular SEMH needs, for a targeted intervention based on the Emotional and Social Curriculum. Leaders analysed behaviour incident logs and attendance records to highlight pupils who were struggling to stay regulated in class or were frequently absent.

What does it look like in practice? (continued)

A targeted intervention for SEMH (continued)

To support this process, they also used the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, a widely recognised tool that helped leaders build a baseline picture of pupils' emotional and behavioural development. This approach ensured that the intervention reached the pupils who need it most.

Targeted interventions

Targeted interventions based on the Emotional and Social Curriculum are run in small groups by a teacher and pastoral staff.

- **Pupils:** 16 children from early years to year 4 are currently accessing the intervention.
- **Grouping:** Pupils are organised into three small groups (Early Years Foundation Stage & year 1, years 2 & 3, and year 4).
- **Timing:** Sessions run from 9–11am, strategically placed on Monday and Tuesday mornings to improve punctuality and attendance.
- **Staffing:** A teacher with pastoral expertise leads the sessions.

The activities in these sessions are based on Mulberry Bush's specialist curriculum, which focuses on five core areas of emotional and social learning:

1. Self-awareness
2. Self-management
3. Social awareness
4. Relationship skills, and
5. Responsible decision-making.

Financial implications

Trust-wide licences for Mulberry Bush range from bronze to gold packages. These packages, which vary in cost from £530 to £1,325, offer different levels of support and access to materials.

The cost of the intervention at Bayards Hill is approximately £300 per pupil per term, which includes costs of resources and the associated training and support. Funding for the intervention was drawn from a combination of sources. For some pupils, top-up funding from Education, Health and Care Plans helped cover the costs. Additionally, the school made strategic use of its staffing budget, allocating around £20 per hour to cover the time of staff delivering and supporting the programme.





What has been the impact?

School and trust leaders report that Bayards Hill have prioritised quality first teaching and made significant improvements over time. They emphasise that the school has strengthened its teaching practice and embedded consistent behaviour policies. Leaders link the success of the subsequent intervention to the strength of the groundwork laid in teaching and behaviour.

Since introducing the Mulberry Bush Emotional and Social Curriculum, Bayards Hill has observed promising signs of positive impact. Behaviour incidents have declined since the beginning of the year, and most pupils in the targeted interventions group have shown improved attendance. In particular:

- 81% of pupils selected for the intervention showed a reduction in their Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores between September and January, indicating a decrease in emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- 75% of pupils selected for the intervention improved attendance between September and January, with an average increase of 4.4%.

Observations by teachers at Bayards Hill have also found that for pupils in the intervention:

- Those who previously struggled with peer relationships are now showing greater willingness to share, cooperate, and work alongside others.
- Pupils are showing fewer signs of anxiety and withdrawal, particularly those who previously found the classroom environment overwhelming.
- Pupils are engaging more readily with their peers and participating in classroom activities.

Teachers and leaders self-reported an increased confidence and a greater sense of preparedness in supporting pupils with SEMH needs within mainstream settings.



Next steps

Having trialled the targeted intervention, Bayards Hill have decided to make this a permanent feature.

The school is expanding this to pupils who are showing early signs of SEMH needs, even if these pupils are not on the SEND register. The school is also supporting the rollout of this approach in other schools across RLT.

The key factors that make it work

Bayards Hill has identified the following key behaviours and content which have made the targeted intervention effective in their setting.

- **Staff knowledge of pupils:** The school ensured that staff delivering the programme had a strong understanding of the pupils and a genuine interest in SEMH work. This meant they had the knowledge to adapt sessions based on pupils' needs. This ownership and passion were seen as vital to the success of the sessions.
- **Reflective practice:** Regular training and reflective practice supports staff with continual development. Ongoing reflection ensures that the methods employed remain effective and responsive to the evolving needs of the children.
- **Continual reassessment of pupil need:** The school regularly reviews pupil participation and proactively adjust group membership as needed to maximise the intervention's effectiveness.
- **Stable intervention space:** Key to the success has been having the interventions take place in the same, designated intervention space. For pupils facing emotional challenges or trauma, this created a predictable routine and a sense of stability.
- **Visual aids:** Visual resources, such as activity cards, help make abstract concepts more accessible to pupils in the sessions.





Advice for school leaders

Bayards Hill have shared lessons that could help other school leaders exploring the Mulberry Bush School Emotional and Social Curriculum, or similar approaches to support pupils' SEMH needs.

1. Consistency:

Ensuring that pupils had a familiar space and a trusted adult to lead the sessions was essential. When this wasn't in place, due to staff changes or timetabling pressures, the impact of the sessions could be diluted. Pupils responded best when they felt safe, supported, and knew what to expect.

2. Evaluation:

While qualitative feedback from staff, pupils, and parents has been overwhelmingly positive, collecting and analysing behaviour and attendance data on the programme's impact remains an area for development. Leaders are continuing to explore how to capture the full picture both in terms of outcomes and to inform future adaptations so that they can better measure and sustain the success of the intervention over time.

Further reading and resources

Leaders have shared some examples of resources they consulted throughout this process, which they would recommend other school and trust leaders to consider in their own contexts.

- See [The Mulberry Bush website](#) for further information on the intervention covered in this case study: their specialist Emotional and Social Curriculum for schools.
- See [The Education Endowment Foundation's summary of emotional and social learning](#) to learn more about the impact of interventions that seek to meet pupils' particular emotional and social needs.
- See this [Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition report](#) to learn more about the link between emotional and social development, and supporting positive mental health and behaviour.



**Inclusion
in Practice**

inclusioninpractice.org.uk