Inclusion in Practice

Case Study:

Star Academies

Background information

Trust: Star Academies

Director of SEND: Elizabeth Murray

About the trust: Founded in 2010, Star Academies oversees 36 schools across Lancashire, Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire, the Midlands and London. It is made up of community primaries, comprehensives and a grammar school; 21 of its schools are Muslim faith schools.

SEN pupils: 18%

Percentage of disadvantaged students: 44% of pupils eligible for Pupil Premium and 39% eligible for Ever6 free school meals

Percentage of students speaking English as an additional language: 54%

MAT Progress 8 score: 0.58

Key stage 2: 84% of pupils meeting expected standard in reading, writing and maths at Key Stage 2 (2025 provisional)

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?

Star Academies aims to create a culture of ambition for all its pupils, regardless of need. It believes that its schools should provide an environment in which every pupil can succeed.

Key to this, therefore, is knowing exactly which pupils need additional support – and what that specific support should be. "It's about identification of need and understanding what current and presenting barriers to learning are, so that we skilfully identify the strategies and reasonable adjustments and provision that are going to make the most difference to that individual child or that group of children," says Elizabeth Murray, Star Academies' Director of SEND. And, Ms Murray adds, it's important that all staff members, in all schools, share the trust's ambition for its pupils. "How do you do that?" she says. "You have to train people. You have to have high-quality training. You need good systems that support identification of need, and a joined-up pedagogical approach.

"But you also need tools to really support schools, so they are able to continue to do that work."

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> **Elizabeth Murray, Star Academies' Director of SEND**

What challenges were you trying to address?

In 2021, when Ms Murray began working for Star Academies, individual schools would contact her whenever they needed support: "Obviously, that was slightly overwhelming," she says. So the trust began compiling a baseline report of where all Star schools were with SEND provision, and devised a self-evaluation questionnaire for schools to complete, drawing on elements of the Ofsted inspection framework, the SEND code of practice, statutory compliance areas and evidence-based research.

The questionnaire was divided into 15 priority areas, each made up of binary yes/no questions, and each school's SENCO and Principal was asked to complete it.

So, for example, the "culture" priority area included questions such as: "Does the SLT lead have experience of leading SEND? Does the SENCO attend leadership meetings? Do all leaders across the school understand their accountability?"

And the section on policy and procedures asked: "Are teachers making referrals via the graduated approach?" and "Is the register updated by the SENCO and accessed by the senior leadership team?"

Once the responses had been returned, Ms Murray worked with the data team to turn the responses into a dashboard, breaking down the data by school type and question, so Star could see how each school answered in a granular way. This then allowed the trust to conduct a termly comparison, and to observe how things may be improving.

What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

The dashboard provided Star with an overview of where there was confident practice, where schools felt supported and where the highest pressure points were. From there, it was clear that the trust needed a pedagogical model for SEND that was fully integrated: "So that it's not SEND and teaching, but SEND and teaching working together to ensure that we're meeting the needs of all pupils, including those pupils with SEND".

That was a starting point for the All Stars Succeed strategy.

What challenges were you trying to address? (continued)

The approach:

The Star team saw early identification of need as a key part of any effective SEND strategy. They wanted to ensure that every school had a referral system, so that whenever teachers spotted a particular need, they were able to refer that easily on to their SENCO.

This was coupled with a trust-wide toolkit for presenting needs. The aim is that at every stage between early detection and assessment, the school will be thinking carefully about how the pupil is presenting. This then enables staff to work out which strategies it should be using to support the child at any given moment in time.

"What I find and have found frustrating in my years doing this sort of work is that is that sometimes SEND is seen as the dark arts," says Ms Murray. "This sense that only a trained SENCO or educational psychologist can do this work.

"Really, my goal was about empowering teachers, pastoral staff, TAs to say: actually, everybody can notice what is happening with a child. They can observe what's going on. And that can really support identification of barriers."

To complement the presenting-needs toolkit, the trust has also developed an adaptive-strategy toolkit, designed to support SENCOs and teachers alike. Any teacher can choose to try out any adaptive strategy, to see if it benefits a particular pupil.

For example, if an English teacher notices that a child is struggling with a comprehension task, she may choose a scaffolding strategy from the adaptive-strategy toolkit and use it for their next lesson with the class group – this is the graduated response in the classroom, in action.

"The point is that they have the power and the capacity to be able to do something right now that can help. I think that's really important – to empower our staff, our teachers and our leaders to feel that they can do that. But also to have high-quality resources that support that work on a day-to-day basis."

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What does it look like in practice?

1. Star Maps

At Star, baseline core assessment testing is conducted every year, with individual pupil data collated and RAG rated, all in one place, on a trust-wide school SEND register. So, for example, if a SENCO were looking at data for an incoming Year 7 cohort, they could see all pupils' scores for the GL Assessment cat4 test and the NGRT reading test, as well as their SATs scores. This allows them to identify potential need immediately.

Every child on the SEND register has what is called a Star Map: a detailed profile of the child and their needs.

There are three different versions of the Star Map, for each of the three sectors: early years, primary and secondary. The opening section of each of map sets out the child's personal details, including their language at home. This section also states whether they have SEND

support or an EHCP, as well as their reading age. (The actual reading age is written here, rather than the standard age score, because this was felt to be more accessible for classroom teachers.)

At secondary, the Star Map includes SAT and cat4 battery scores. The trust has worked with teachers to help them understand what specific battery scores mean. "It's like the penny drops," says Ms Murray. "It can make a huge difference, because once you explain it to somebody, they'll realise: 'Oh, so this pupil has a low quantitative score and if I'm a science teacher, I'm a maths teacher, that's going to present, isn't it?'

"And then, of course, you can drill down into how that's presenting for that child. And then they feel empowered to suggest adaptations, as the subject expert – which is the point."

What does it look like in practice? (continued)

1. Star Maps (continued)

The opening section also includes barriers to learning or identified needs. Where there is no official diagnosis, this section includes the pupil's current and presenting description of need from the teacher and the SENCO.

The language in this section is common across the trust: Ms Murray worked together with a group of SENCOs to consolidate their lexicon. "I didn't want what happens across the country: different language for the same needs," she says.

Alongside barriers to learning or identified needs, the trust lists recommended adaptive-teaching strategies that would make a difference for that child if all teachers used them. However Star places strict limits on these, allowing for no more than five strategies (usually between three and five) per child.

"If we put everything that we've got on a child on to a Star Map for a teacher, they're going to be three or four pages long," says Ms Murray. "But you include those highest-leverage strategies, which would make the most difference to the child if every teacher applied them well. Anything else, you've got to lose."

The next section of a Star Map outlines the pupil's own view of their needs. For a secondary pupil, this is made up of between one and three bullet points, answering the questions: "What helps me? What are my aspirations?" For primary pupils, this section is much longer, comprising questions such as: "What do people like and admire about me?", "What am I good at?", "What do

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What does it look like in practice? (continued)

1. Star Maps (continued)

I find difficult?" and "What helps me to learn?" (The early-years Star Map includes a truncated version of the primary questions.)

Primary and early-years Star Maps also include space for parents' views. Questions here include: "What are your aspirations and hopes for your child in the short, medium and long term?", "What is currently working well for your child?", "What is currently not working well for your child?" and "What is important to and for your child?" There is also an area for "Pupil strengths" and "Pupil areas of difficulty", to be filled out by the child's teacher, followed by "Desired outcomes", completed by the teacher and SENCO together.

All three Star Maps conclude with sections on current provision and, where relevant, subject-specific adaptations.

Primary Star Maps are reviewed termly by the classroom teacher in a co-productive review with parents and the pupil, supported by the SENCO. It is important that the classroom teacher, who spends the most time with the pupil, owns the Star Map and is supported to feel confident leading the review process.

Secondary Star Maps are reviewed twice every academic year, in the autumn and spring terms, in a structured co-productive meeting with parents and the pupil. The aim is that they should provide a space to consider progress and to hear feedback from the pupil while ensuring that parents are fully informed and part of the planning process for the pupil and that the Star Map this should be updated and amended as relevant. In the summer term, SENCOs conduct a review with any pupils where it is required. But they will also spend the term ensuring that the Star Maps are accurate, ready for the following academic year.

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This biannual review looks different in each school but what works best is a distributed approach. In some schools, it is conducted by the senior leadership team ("which is wonderful practice," says Ms Murray); in others, it is led by the SENCO and teaching assistants, or by the heads of year. Where it works best in some schools, Ms Murray says, is where it is led by form tutors – who are provided with relevant training to support them. And classroom teachers are an integral part of the review process, commenting on which adaptive-teaching strategies are proving effective.

In some schools, teachers have added adaptive strategies from the Star Maps to their seating plans. When SENCOs and other leaders visit during a learning walk, therefore, they are able to ask, "Does this strategy work?" And this, in turn, enables them to monitor implementation and create an ongoing dialogue and review of whether pupils' classroom provision is helping them to make progress.

What does it look like in practice? (continued)

2. High Five

Star Maps lay out the provision for each individual child.

However, SEND support is also factored into plans as part of Star's pedagogical approach at curriculum level. The starting point for all teaching and learning is the the All Stars Succeed: High Five chart, which provides a series of adaptations which work for all pupils, but have been proven to have particularly good outcomes for pupils with SEND.

At the top level, these prompts are:

- Know the child
- Plan creatively
- Clear and consistent language
- Scaffold
- Know more, remember more

For each subject, All Stars

Succeed charters include prompts that support adaptation of the curriculum, as well as the subject-specific adaptations included in Star Maps.

To support this, the trust has created practice clinics: slides and video clips that show each of the High Five points in action. These clips are shared by the SEND Improvement team in the SENCO forum, and Teaching Improvement colleagues do the same in the teaching and learning forum. This helps teaching and learning senior leaders and SENCOs to work collaboratively to implement the High 5 in their schools. "This is the sort of work you can do at trust level that makes a huge difference," Ms Murray says.

What has been the impact?

Schools' identification of need has improved. Before the trust-wide SEND register was introduced, the largest areas of identified need across the trust were moderate learning difficulties and social, emotional and mental-health needs. Since the register was introduced, identification of need has become much more specific – resulting in interventions specifically targeted to need.

Nationally, in the 2023-24 academic year, 22 per cent of pupils with SEND achieved the expected level or above in key stage 2 reading, writing and maths combined. At Star, the proportion was 45 per cent – more than double the national level.

What has been the impact? (continued)

That same year, 25 per cent of Star pupils with SEND achieved English and maths grade 5 and above at GCSE, compared with 17 per cent nationally.

And more than 90 per cent of Star pupils with an EHCP achieved their short-term and medium-term targets in 2023-24.

Pupils also speak positively of the provision at the trust, saying that they feel cared for and understood. "I'm able to concentrate for longer," one pupil said. Others say that they benefit from opportunities to reflect on and improve their behaviour.

What have been the key factors that make it work?

Where teaching practice is good, says Ms Murray, SEND provision will also be good. "If you can bring universal practice up across the board, you are going to be able to meet the need of more children," she says. "If the universal practice isn't fit for purpose, then children are going to spike up because it's exacerbating need."

In part, this is about building confidence among staff: giving them the relevant tools and training, and creating an environment where they feel supported by their colleagues. "If you ignore that bit and you leave people working in isolation, then they become more and more stressed," says Ms Murray. "You've got to develop the expectation of a distributed approach to correct that narrative as well."

This means that staff are provided with high-quality tools and strategies, as well as asynchronous training, which they can access as and when needed. But they are also given plenty of support from the central team as well – they conduct regular consultation visits, listening and adapting according to schools' feedback.

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Elizabeth Murray, Star Academies' Director of SEND

What have been the key factors that make it work? (continued)

"We try to be as strategic as possible using the dashboard," says Ms Murray. For example, she is based in the North of England, and cannot easily visit schools in the South. "How do I know that a particular school that I can't get to very easily has a problem?" she says. "Well, I can look at this SEND register and I can see they've got a problem here with identification of need. I can ask for a sample of Star Maps and I can pick up on an issue. I can I know where I've got new SENCOs or new senior leaders line-managing SEND. I can offer some support.

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What advice would you give to other school leaders?

Trust leaders should always start with the facts and the data, the Star team believes. As well as statutory reporting and census reporting, there should be a trust-wide SEND register that records observable need in specific detail.

Trust and school leaders then need to analyse the data critically – which for trust leaders means looking for patterns that the trust can provide resources for.

At school level, too, senior leaders should be working closely with the SEND register and looking at what it is telling them. "Is it what I would expect it to tell me?" says Ms Murray. "So you're interrogating that picture.

"Because then from there you can quite often spot a problem with identification of need. So we need clear systems for early identification of need, and that will include data interpretation."

Schools also need a platform where information about individual pupils is clearly communicated. "Whether it's a pupil passport or a provision map, we need a clear plan in place," she says. "Something that captures at pupil level what it is that provision looks like for children and young people we've identified as having SEND."

There need to be clear processes for reviewing this plan, involving all the relevant stakeholders.

When the relevant data and the SEND register are in place, school leaders are also able to identify quickly which specific additional resources they need to prioritise – which is valuable information when budgets are tight. "You will know, 'OK, I've got 50 per cent of pupils on my SEND register who've got a communication need and can't access any speech and language therapy through the local authority,'" says Ms Murray. "'I think I need to source some privately.' It helps you to strategically allocate resource.

"There is a lot more complexity now across all of our schools. So knowing your SEND cohort at your school and noticing as it changes is really important."
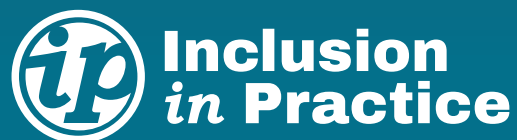
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Where can others go to find out more?

- **Star Map: early years**
- **Star Map: primary**
- **Star Map: secondary**
- **All Stars Succeed: High Five**
- **Speech, language and communication need: presenting-needs toolkit**
- **Speech, language and communication need: adaptive-strategy toolkit**

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