



## The Case For Being An Inclusive School In Essex

*"The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members" Mahatma Gandhi*

There are strong moral arguments for all schools being inclusive. Schools exist to serve their local communities, to create educational settings which value every child in that community, and to recognise both the potential and the contributions they can make, regardless of who they are. As beacons of humanity, schools have a duty to educate and protect the more vulnerable, and so to strive to promote equality and social mobility. As such, the rights of pupils with special needs, and the subsequent duties on schools, are enshrined in legislation such as the Equalities Act (2010).

However, aside from the moral imperative, there are numerous practical benefits and advantages to being inclusive:

- 1. Outcomes** - academic outcomes are rightly important, but while league tables can, at first glance, be seen as a barrier to being inclusive, this is far from being the case. There is much research demonstrating both the social and the academic benefits, for the vast majority of pupils with special needs, of being educated in inclusive schools. However, pupils without, or with as yet undiagnosed special needs, can also benefit from better conceived and structured curricula, a more highly skilled workforce, and greater access to the high quality resources found in truly inclusive schools. Crucially, schools which are inclusive are also highly skilled in recognising and meeting the needs of all pupils as individuals, and this more personalised approach to learning can, in turn, enable far higher levels of progress for all.
  - 2. Benefits for pupils with special needs** - perhaps most important of all to the inclusion debate, are the benefits to the pupils themselves. There are clear benefits to all pupils with special needs, wherever practically possible, of being educated with their peers. Pupils with special needs cite the importance of making friends, a sense of belonging, and feeling part of their local community, as central to their feelings of self-worth, confidence, levels of motivation, and sense of identity. By being integrated rather than segregated, they find leaving school, and entering the world of work, easier to navigate. When pupils with special needs are encouraged and supported to participate fully in school life, they become genuine contributors, and both enrich and strengthen the overall collective ethos of schools, which are the ultimate manifestation of teams.
  - 3. Benefits for all pupils** - less obvious are the considerable benefits to all pupils in schools, where pupils without, or with as yet undiagnosed special needs, are taught alongside pupils who do have special needs. Exposure to different ways of thinking and ways of sensing the world, as well as approaches to learning and life in general, enrich the educational experiences of everyone, promote character development, and support a school's ethos and values. By working together in a truly supportive environment, we shift the culture away from one of perceived barriers and obstacles, to a genuinely 'can-do' mentality, where anything is possible. After all, education is uniquely placed to break down fear and prejudice, foster mutual understanding and tolerance, and truly prepare pupils for life in modern Britain, and to become the global citizens of the future.
  - 4. A highly skilled workforce** - teachers who work in inclusive schools have to be well trained in both special needs diagnoses and research-led pedagogy, to address the needs of these learners. However, this training, in turn, benefits all pupils, as a result of a more highly aspirational vision of quality-first teaching, one which is underpinned by sophisticated differentiation, both in lessons and in curriculum design, ongoing formative assessment, and innovative approaches to more personalised, pupil-centred learning. Indeed, knowledge of wider approaches such as Trauma Perceived Practice (TPP) found in inclusive schools, and the latest research around metacognition etc., can benefit all pupils at different points in their school lives.
  - 5. Recruitment and retention** - recruitment and retention of high quality teachers are both a local, regional and national challenge. However, the training opportunities and high quality CPD offered in inclusive schools are often powerful lures for teachers looking not only to hone their skills, but to make a real difference to the life chances of all pupils. Indeed, a strong sense of moral purpose is what persuades many high calibre staff in inclusive schools to stay, and commit longer-term to their school community.
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6. **Leadership and governance** - the arguments above apply equally to the recruitment and retention of the very best leaders, who are driven by a strong sense of social justice, and passion for the power of education as a force for good. In turn, inclusive schools also attract high calibre governors, who likewise feel a strong sense of moral duty and desire to make a difference to the communities they serve. These governors, in turn, better ensure the needs of all pupils, and their families, are heard, offering a broader overall perspective, and constructive, robust challenge. When teachers, leaders, and governors buy in whole-heartedly to a school's vision, as long as it is ethical and principled, there is little they cannot achieve!

7. **Harnessing diversity** - inclusive schools also recognise and harness the power of diversity to society. In a world facing unprecedented challenges, new ways of thinking, new perspectives and new approaches have never been in greater demand. Inclusion promotes and celebrates diversity as the force of good it can be, if properly nurtured. In particular, by understanding that we are not all the same, despite all that we have in common, pupils, staff, parents and, indeed, members of the wider community, can better appreciate what others offer, as well as gain deeper insights into the different needs, and even behaviours, of others. A harmonious community cannot exist without high levels of self-awareness, self-regulation, and awareness of others; inclusive schools, with their strong focus on relationships, enable this to happen.

8. **Building communities** - schools, which are truly inclusive, not only support all the pupils in their locality, but in doing so send out a powerful message to the whole area that all people should be valued, and treated fairly and equally. This generates a genuine community ethos of respect and mutual support. In turn, members of such a community are more inclined to get involved themselves, and also to offer to help. Crucially, the parents and carers of pupils with special needs have the right to be included in their child's education, and in turn feel part of their local community. This is not possible for many families if their children are educated long distances away from home.

9. **Supporting families** - as well as helping families remain part of their local community, truly inclusive schools can help equip families to work together as a unit to support their children with special needs. In this way, families can grow, enjoy their time together, and move forwards with strength into the future. They can embrace the challenges of life after school, and beyond, with confidence.

10. **Building wider educational learning communities** - in the same way as truly inclusive schools send out a powerful message to local residents, they also become centres of expertise in relation to outstanding teaching. This in turn leads to the creation of powerful new networks to share best practice, innovate, attract the best teachers, and generate new income streams from successful funding bids. Inclusive schools reach out to other inclusive schools, and in making such connections, the exchange of ideas and resources benefits all. Conversely, schools which are not inclusive, are, by nature, increasingly insular. In the current context of reduced budgets, staffing shortages, capacity issues, and the increased need for schools to play a leading role in their local communities, strong and sustainable networks, bound by a common purpose, have never been more vital in an ever-more connected world.

11. **Better resources to benefit all pupils** - resources for pupils with special needs have improved beyond all recognition in recent years, in part driven by advances in cognitive science and technology, and are now highly sophisticated. Inclusive schools not only invest in such resources, but, crucially, know of their existence, and the potential benefits to other pupils. In particular, developments in ICT resources have allowed more pupils than ever to overcome difficulties, and make greater progress than previously expected. These cutting-edge resources can benefit all pupils at different points in their education.

12. **Budgets** - inclusive schools reduce the overall need for pupils with special needs, who could be educated in mainstream settings, to be educated in more expensive, often out of area, provision. Reducing the total annual amount of money spent by Essex LA on unnecessary, more expensive provision, frees up additional money for all school budgets, which can then be spent on both pupils with, and without, special needs.

Despite the obvious challenges, the value of being inclusive is clear, whether it be from a moral and social standpoint, or the clear practical advantages, from recruitment and retention, to resourcing and curriculum approaches. **Ofsted** has, therefore, now adapted its new inspection framework to shine a light on the provision for pupils with special needs. Inspectors are clear that a school cannot be outstanding, if it fails in its duties to be inclusive.

**The case for all schools being truly inclusive has never been stronger!**

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