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Special needs system requires 'radical overhaul'

Government report reveals scale of struggle some parents face, and advocates a reform of the statementing system to prioritise the needs of the child over the availability of resources

Polly Curtis, education editor
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A special needs child learning to write. Photograph: Don Tonge /Alamy

The government should "radically overhaul" the system for children with special educational needs, to provide new support for parents and pressurise schools to cater properly for pupils whose learning difficulties put them at risk of being left behind, a government commissioned review reports today.

The inquiry, which was immediately accepted in part by the schools secretary, Ed Balls, reveals the scale of the struggle parents have to get appropriate support for children with special educational needs such as autism or dyslexia.

Under the plans, there will be a new helpline for parents providing independent advice and Ofsted would have to judge how well schools are providing for pupils with SEN.

A pilot of a new system of "statementing" pupils, which determines pupils' level of need and what support is necessary, aims to make the process more transparent and enable parents to challenge decisions. The system of statementing will be reviewed to guarantee that local authorities put the needs of the child first, rather than availability of resources. It follows parental complaints that authorities are deciding the level of their child's need according to the funding available to them rather than the scale of their problems, leading to a postcode lottery in services across the country.

And it will be easier for parents to seek redress. The local government ombudsman will get extra funding to take complaints from parents unhappy with the support they receive, while the Anti-Bullying Alliance will get extra money to tackle SEN- and disability-related bullying.

Brian Lamb, who conducted the review on behalf of the government, said: "We met

some of the happiest parents in the country and some of the angriest. Many had children who are well-supported and making good progress. But we also met parents for whom the education system represents a battle to get the needs of their child identified and met. The crucial issue is that both experiences happen within the same system. While the aims of the SEN framework remain relevant, implementation has too often failed to live up to them.

"There needs to be a radical recasting of the relationship between parents, schools and local authorities to ensure a clearer focus on the outcomes and life chances for children with SEN and disability."

Balls said: "We are now working to ensure all parents have confidence in decision making by giving them and their children a stronger voice at the heart of the SEN system."

The National Autistic Society (NAS) warned that unless the government ensured that local authorities complied with their duties the changes proposed by the Lamb review would not make the difference needed by parents.

Mark Lever, the chief executive of the NAS, said: "We hear terrible stories from parents, of local authorities flouting the law by ignoring diagnoses, not meeting statutory timescales, failing to write statements properly, and even saying they don't do statements any more."

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