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## Submission to the Education Select Committee: Solving the SEND Crisis

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## Introduction

The Bell Foundation is a charity which aims to overcome exclusion through language education by working with partners on innovation, research, training and practical interventions. Since 2012, we have worked to improve the outcomes for learners using English as an additional language (EAL), responding rapidly to the needs of schools, providing teachers with evidence-based resources, guidance and training to support learners effectively and confidently. We have reached over 100,000 school practitioners through our programme of EAL training. In addition, in our efforts to build long lasting EAL expertise nationally, we have trained, licensed and accredited over 30 organisations and 90 trainers across the country to work regionally with 'Language for Results' our programme of EAL continuing professional development (CPD) for schools.

It is important to note that using EAL is **not** a special educational need. Depending on their level of proficiency in English, the language of instruction in English schools, multilingual children who are using EAL may face linguistic challenges and need targeted language support – both to help them learn English and to learn all their subjects in English. Without appropriate resources and knowledge, schools run the risk of conflating language needs with SEND and misdiagnosing learners using EAL.

This evidence builds upon guidance for schools on EAL and SEND published by The Bell Foundation in 2024 which is available on our website at: [EAL and SEND: Guidance for Integrated Provision in Schools - The Bell Foundation](#)

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### Learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL)

In England, more than 1.7 million learners in state-funded primary and secondary schools are recorded by the Department for Education (DfE, 2024-) as being “exposed to a language at home that is known or believed to be other than English” – a figure that has increased steadily over the last decade. This statistic underlines the diverse linguistic profiles of many schools across the country and the need for the provision of language support to ensure that learners using EAL can access learning across the curriculum and succeed.

Learners using EAL are a diverse group who come from a range of social, economic, and geographical backgrounds. As a result, there are many factors that can impact on their progress in learning English and learning through the medium of English, including but not limited to how much previous schooling they may have had, how old they were when they entered the schooling system in the UK, and how close the writing systems in the languages they use are to those in English. EAL support needs to be designed to take those factors into consideration.

### The relationship between EAL and SEND

As in all learner populations, there are significant numbers of multilingual children who do have SEND. Government statistics indicate that there are just under 230,000 children in schools in England who speak, or are thought to speak, a language other than English, and who also have SEND (UK Government Statistics Service, June 2023). For those children to thrive and reach their potential, it is vital to identify them as early as possible and to provide targeted and integrated support that addresses both their linguistic challenges and their special learning needs. This requires schools to have systems and provisions in place and EAL and SEND staff to work together on correctly identifying, assessing, referring, and supporting multilingual children and their families.

This is a particular challenge for older learners who arrive late into the school system and may have had no or very disrupted formal schooling prior to their arrival because of low enrolment rates in schools, or displacement arising from conflict. Where children have had limited opportunities to learn school literacy in their home language, the absence of this important foundation can hinder their progress in acquiring school literacy in English.

Specific learning needs can be difficult for school staff to identify if the child and/or their parents are new to English. Parents may not disclose the existence of SEND during the admission process – either due to language barriers or for other reasons. In many countries, disabled children do not enjoy full rights to participation in education or disability can carry a cultural stigma, this can influence parents' decision not to tell the school about any learning needs. English schools may also struggle to access education and health care plans from the children's previous schools abroad. Furthermore, admissions staff do not always have access to appropriate information, guidance or tools to support them in ascertaining whether a child has potential SEND in addition to their EAL status.

Added to this complexity, is the fact that schools use a range of tools to assess whether a child learning EAL also has SEND and often rely on tools designed for fluent English speakers – tools that are not fit to provide accurate or reliable information about learners using EAL, especially those who are new to English or at the early stages of English acquisition. Without appropriate resources and knowledge, schools run the risk of conflating language needs with SEND and misdiagnosing learners using EAL.

The Bell Foundation surveyed schools in 2021 about the tools and assessment used to make judgements about whether an EAL learner also has SEND. This suggested that there are varying interpretations on how best to identify multilingual children who have SEND and provide appropriate support. Without appropriate resources and knowledge, schools run the risk of conflating language needs with SEND and misdiagnosing learners using EAL. For example, a learner who is in a 'silent period' as they become accustomed to an English-speaking environment could be wrongly identified as having speech and language difficulties.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, failure to identify SEND as early as possible may result in children not being offered the targeted support and arrangements they need to make progress in their learning – and to demonstrate that learning under the right assessment conditions.

## Recommendations for schools

The Bell Foundation has advocated for a whole-school approach to EAL and SEND provision which ensures that all needs are reliably and accurately identified, and that sustainable support strategies are put in place for both language and special needs. Specifically, a whole-school approach:

- Enables the early identification of EAL learners who also have SEND, thereby helping to remove barriers to learning.
- Promotes effective communication and teamwork between the EAL and SEND Coordinators to ensure a joined-up approach.
- Builds provision for targeted and specialist support.
- Ensures that learners and their families are involved in decision-making and that each child's voice is at the centre of support plans.
- Creates sustainable school–family partnerships which are especially important in supporting learners with SEND.

## Recommendations for policy

In order to adequately address the needs of learners with both EAL and SEND, and to ensure that learners with EAL are not misdiagnosed, there is a need for the Department for Education to address the lack of robust guidance on EAL for schools.

The expertise required for meeting SEND needs, and the needs of pupils with EAL is different, and schools cannot rely on primarily SEND-focused staff to provide the needed expertise in EAL. This is reinforced by the fact while SEND guidance in the SEND Code of Practice is statutory for those who work with and support children and young people with SEND in England, there is no equivalent statutory guidance for EAL or mandatory training for EAL coordinators. Schools' approaches are led by guidance from the Department for Education. Learners with both SEND and EAL must have their linguistic development and special educational needs addressed equally to ensure that they are able to succeed.

The Bell Foundation therefore recommends the development of statutory guidance for EAL and mandatory training for EAL coordinators to ensure that the complex needs of those children who have both SEND and EAL are appropriately addressed by staff who have the right profile of skills and expertise.

The Department for Education should also develop and issue a standardised SEND screening tool designed for use with children who have EAL to limit occurrences of misdiagnosis.

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### About The Bell Foundation

This briefing has been developed by The Bell Foundation, a charitable, evidence-led foundation that aims to improve educational, employment and justice outcomes for people who speak English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Foundation collaborates with leading universities and think tanks to develop an evidence base and works with a network of schools to develop and deliver practical solutions to help improve the attainment of pupils who are at risk of underachieving. In 2022, the Foundation supported over 26,000 teachers and educational professionals to support children who use English as an Additional Language through the training of teachers and webinars.

A series of policy briefings about our three programmes, EAL education in schools, ESOL and post-16 English education, and overcoming language barriers in the criminal justice system, is available on our website here: [Policy - The Bell Foundation \(bell-foundation.org.uk\)](https://bell-foundation.org.uk)

