

Especially troubling

Children with special needs are being particularly badly hit by the current schools funding crisis, writes **Andrew Don**

Children with special educational needs are the silent victims of the current schools funding crisis, the latest in a string of difficulties in SEN provision that has developed over more than a decade. "With the current funding crisis, there have been reductions in staff and the first to go are the support staff who are instrumental in helping children with special needs," says Dr Rona Tutt, vice-president of the National Association of Head Teachers.

What should have been a real increase in total schools funding in the current financial year has been wiped out in most cases by increased staffing bills, including the higher cost of, and demand for, SEN provision.

The National Union of Teachers fears there will be a huge cutting back of centrally held services for SEN and increased pressure on the funding of statements and spending for processes to identify SEN children. John Bangs, the NUT's head of education, believes parents who have the resources to go to tribunal or the High Court will continue to secure their children's rights, but those who do not will be cut away from the resources they need. "The bottom line is there are probably a large number of kids who deserve support that won't get it."

The number of statements for special educational needs dropped from 258,200 to 248,982 in 2002/3 in England, with the biggest fall in primary schools, from 75,300 to 70,729, according to the Department for Education and Skills. The SEN budget accounts for about 12.6% of education spending and about 65% is spent at school level. The percentage of pupils per LEA with statements ranges from 1.1% to 4.6%.

But there is a wide variation in how SEN funding is distributed between LEAs, and consequently there are winners and losers. Funding in some areas is allocated on the basis of a pupil audit; in others it is delegated to schools according to indicators such as the number of children who have free meals and on pupils' prior attainment.

Anthea Aberly, headteacher at Rosh Pinah primary, Edgware, in Barnet LEA, says the use of these criteria has no qualitative basis. "The key fear is that schools will want to select their intakes in order not to rely on special needs funding and this is against inclusivity, which is a key component of government and LEAs' policies," she says.

Several schools in the borough have been unable to replace support staff in their special needs departments, as have many schools throughout England and Wales. But Barnet LEA insists it has "no specific problems in SEN needs".

Brian Harrison-Jennings, general secretary of the Association of Educational Psychologists, says it is "only too common" that even when statements of special needs are issued, they are

not being implemented. "There is no proper audit to make sure the money is being spent on the children. Sometimes the money goes to boost schools' position in the league tables." Money for special needs should be wholly spent on them, he adds.

A DfES spokesperson said schools should not be using funding difficulties as an excuse not to implement statements or make special provision.

The Local Government Association, which is working with the DfES to identify why costs in this sector appear to have risen so significantly, is finding the situation frustrating. "Authorities are seeing increases in numbers of pupils with profound multiple special needs and have to deliver their responsibilities to these vulnerable children and their families out of budgets within tight financial pressures," says Graham Lane, chairman of the LGA's education and lifelong learning executive.

Ashdown school in Poole, Dorset,

has cut four teaching assistants' jobs, and its headteacher, Ashley Pellegrini, says he cannot provide the help he would like to SEN children who do not have statements. "That's the general message I am getting from all headteachers in Poole."

At South Camden community school in north London, 30% of pupils have SEN and 5% have statements. Headteacher Rosemary Leeke says: "If the funding situation is not improved, one of the biggest concerns would be... the larger group of students who are being supported from the school's delegated budget. If that budget is increasingly stretched, it will be inadequate."

One special educational needs co-ordinator said: "It will be the children that suffer. The government sees crime rising and a lot of that is due to children disaffected at school. If you don't help children when they're young, they turn off."



All Saints primary school, Ilkley: delighted children were told they were allowed to use scooters and skateboards and to cycle to school once they had passed the proficiency test. Then 'drivers' and 'conductors' were recruited for walking buses Photograph: Robin Hammond/Guzelian

still further. All Saints uses its two walking bus routes one day a week at the moment. But the initiative has encouraged pupils and parents to walk to school even on days when the walking bus scheme is not operating.

David Cartwright's real-life bright yellow bus plays a part in this strategy, too. Much publicised on account of the American-style livery, the real attraction is that it has a regular driver known to all the children and an iron set of rules.

"We know who's catching the bus. We tick them off and if they're not there, their homes and the schools are contacted straight away," says Cartwright, who takes his holidays only when school's out. The bus had one hiccup, when Ilkley's main water main burst on its first day and it was 20 minutes late, but it is now close to doubling its passengers from the 5% who bussed to school in 2000.

"I think we're into a virtuous circle now," says Hamill, who senses two main assets in Ilkley's mixture of non-car ways of school commuting. "Parents often use the car if they feel they can't rely on the other services. Or they're less convenient. We've reassured them on that. And they're also worried about safety, especially when they see the traditional mud-

dle of cars at a school's gates."

The town's drop in car use has helped that dramatically. All Saints' sister school, Ashlands, has not had a single complaint about poor driving or parking from neighbours or parents for a whole year. Last week, a couple of big 4x4s briefly broke the golden rule not to drop off in Cartwright's turning circle, but they were given meaningful looks. If they hadn't scarpers rapidly, one of the staff would have been out with a warning.

Some stropiness may still prove part of the Ilkley picture, and everyone acknowledges that a small minority of parents from outlying farms or with complex family arrangements still have to drive and drop off. But people power and, even more, pupil-power are driving the change to walking, bussing and biking.

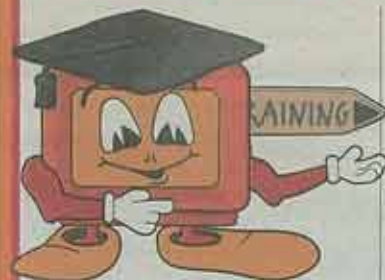
At Ilkley grammar school, destination of most of the town's primary pupils, it is distinctly uncool to be dropped off, says Hamill. And Alona Anderson, who's eight, speaks for friends such as scooterist Max Garford-Masters and cyclist Myles Locke, who are both 10: "Me and Mummy and my sister love walking, except when it rains. But it's got to be raining really hard to stop us. Maybe even snowing."

'A large number of kids who deserve support won't get it'

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It doesn't have to be hands-on — a demo with a commentary can be much less threatening. Why not offer "a relaxing tour of the internet"? Bring parents in, sit them down with a cup of tea, then walk them through the web, slowly, on a big projected screen (borrow one from a local secondary school if you don't have one). As you move through the web, say what you are seeing, what you are doing and why.

We want to open up our ICT suite to parents and the local community after school — is this sensible?

The local community pays for the resources of the school which is usually only open for 190 days a year (1,330 hours a year of use and 7,430 hours of non-use, based on a possible 24-hour-a-day

opening option). Put that way, access for the community for a few hours a week seems fair. Get more guidance at www.parentsonline.gov.uk

How can I best tell parents about the wonders of our new internet suite?

Why not run a "take your parents to school" event — students take mum, dad or grandparents into school and book a computer for a half-hour session to show them how they use ICT in school and the type of work they do. You could also use the event to provide guidance on home internet use www.pin.org.uk/safety/familyCode.htm

Is it true that the fastest growing group of internet users are the over-60s?

Yes. The net offers communication with relatives over seas, gardening and culinary information and new tools for searching out the family tree. Run an event for grandparents based on these themes and they will flock in. See details for Grandparents Online Week (September 22-26) at www.parentsonline.gov.uk/2003/events/events/hints.html



For further information on online learning issues and how to hold a Parents Online event visit www.parentsonline.gov.uk