

*Success in Mainstream Schools
for Students with Complex
Needs: Lessons from the USA
for British Schools*

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2024 Churchill Fellow

**the
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Executive Summary

The purpose of this research is to investigate the practices and approaches that enable teachers and leaders in mainstream British schools to improve the educational outcomes of their most vulnerable students. UK mainstream schools are grappling with funding shortfalls, teacher shortages, increasing numbers of pupils with additional needs, and diminishing access to specialist provision. The results of these interrelated challenges can be seen in exclusion data which highlights that excluded children are five times more likely to live in poverty and five times more likely to have special educational needs amongst other factors which increases their level of vulnerability.¹ Similarly, experienced teachers are leaving the profession at alarming rates with poor behaviour from students and unmanageable workloads as the most common reasons cited.² In 2026 there are currently 400 fewer teachers in schools in the UK than there were in 2025 with 0.5% of teaching posts remaining empty.³ The reality of this in practice is far more stark as schools are overrepresented by teachers who are new to the profession, teachers deployed to areas outside of their specialism and a reliance on teachers who do not have Qualified Teacher Status. Providing adequate support for students with complex needs requires experienced, specialist professionals who are given enough time to do their work with care. Without this, both the young people and adults suffer.

Although the crisis within the education system is broadly recognised and government bodies have pledged to enact change, clear and actionable strategies remain absent.⁴ Personal experience has taught me that there is incredible work being done by dedicated professionals who have enabled children to thrive in educational settings but they are broadly working in silo and not as part of an institution or sector-wide ethos, although there are many grassroots organisations attempting to connect likeminded educators in order to address this.

The purpose of this research project is to better understand organisations in which inclusive practice has been built into the foundations of schools as a model for the UK. I wanted to experience classrooms in which educators were confident that they had the tools to support the students in their care and with demonstrable measures which showed this to be true. Where this was the case, leaders were passionate in their belief in a set of shared values and had clear, tangible strategies for embedding this practice across the schools.

¹ 2030: Lost Learning Falling Nationally, The Difference, [The-Difference-2025-to-2030-Strategy.pdf](#) p. 6

² Teacher recruitment, training and retention, House of Commons Committee Report (2024) [Teacher recruitment, training and retention - Education Committee](#)

³ School workforce in England, Department for Education (2025) [School workforce in England, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ Increasing teacher numbers: secondary and further education, Committee of Public Accounts (2025) [Increasing teacher numbers: Secondary and further education](#)

Key Findings

Schools which were truly inclusive in their approach to meeting the needs of their most vulnerable students understood the positive impact that an inclusive approach had on all students. Almost all the good practice observed was universal rather than targeted. It was seen as an essential part of the school that benefitted all staff and all learners and was viewed as non-negotiable rather than a platitude or afterthought. In summary, these schools all understand the importance of the following principles:

1. **Wellbeing as the foundation of learning** – There is a shared conviction that a child's wellbeing is intrinsically connected to their educational outcomes and that true academic success cannot be achieved without emotional wellbeing.
2. **Community and belonging as core to success** – A strong sense of community and belonging is viewed as fundamental to every child's educational journey and overall development. Carefully planned activities make up regular events in the school calendar.
3. **Supporting cognition and wellbeing together** – Strategies and tools designed to enhance cognition also play a vital role in supporting young people experiencing stress or trauma.
4. **Empowering teachers to nurture emotional learning** – Teachers must be explicitly supported, through training and guidance, to develop their ability to foster emotional learning as an integral part of their professional role.
5. **Dedicated time, training, and resources** – Schools need protected time, high-quality training, and targeted resources to create environments that actively promote and sustain children's wellbeing.
6. **Clear structures and language** – For wellbeing to be fully embedded in school culture, there must be clear frameworks that define how this will be carried out. A consistent, shared language enables staff to discuss an area of education that can be elusive with confidence and coherence. Agreed terminology, documented processes, and scheduled time for reflection and planning review ensure that such practices do not fade away but are sustained and measurable.

This final principle ensures that the others can be embedded without dependency on individual enthusiasm.

Methodology

The research was conducted through a series of school visits, interviews, and informal observations in the USA. My own professional network within the UK education sector connected me with like-minded educators and practitioners in the USA, with a particular focus on institutions where trauma-informed practice was well established, recognising that this approach first originated there. Connections with educational charities and think tanks facilitated introductions to school leaders, teachers, and support staff, enabling a deeper understanding of how trauma-informed principles were embedded within their settings.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout, with all participants informed of the research purpose and their contributions treated confidentially. An information sheet (Appendix A) was provided to all participants ahead of our interviews to ensure contributors felt informed and comfortable with the intentions of the project. Despite this, conducting this research proved to be particularly challenging due to the sensitivity of the topic. Many participants expressed discomfort at being positioned as examples of best practice, often acknowledging that more could be done within their settings. Others appeared hesitant to engage fully, perhaps concerned that open discussion might reveal areas of weakness or ineffective practice. Every effort was made to overcome this and I was grateful to find a number of willing participants. Interviews with teachers have been anonymised so that they could speak freely about their school's practices without compromising relationships with colleagues, students and parents.

In total, I interviewed representatives from three institutions working towards structural changes to education, visited three schools who have embedded inclusive practices into their foundation and interviewed six teachers currently working in US high schools.

To reach a larger community, I also attended a conference in California. The Institute for Social Emotional Learning (IFSEL) is an organisation dedicated to the explicit teaching of emotional regulation to teachers and students. Their Summer Institute has been established with the aim of 'providing opportunities for collaboration, reflection and renewal'.⁵ This experience connected me further with committed educators and it also provided many tangible examples of good practice that can be embedded within the curriculum and structure of UK schools.

⁵ Summer SEL Institutes, the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning [Summer Social & Emotional Learning \(SEL\) Institutes](#)

Contextual Overview

The UK's education system has long favoured inclusion over needs-led placements which can be deemed as a form of segregation, removing students with the greatest needs from the most effective institutions. This process arguably began in force with the Education Act 1981 which gave all students the right to a mainstream education. Noticeably, such legislation is missing from the USA where a mainstream placement must be considered but is not guaranteed. A decision is then made by professionals about which setting would be considered the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). In the UK, parental and student preference for a place in a mainstream setting is weighted more heavily than those of teachers and other professionals.

To promote integration, Educational Health Care Plans (EHCPs) were introduced in the UK in 2014 with the goal of ensuring schools had access to additional funding to meet the needs of all students. Similarly, in the USA students have access to an Individualized Education Program (IEP) which is also a legal document outlining specific strategies and support for students with additional needs. A major difference between the two is that schools or school districts can make a case that they are unable to provide the level of support outlined in the IEP whilst schools in the UK who say they cannot manage can be brought to a tribunal where it is highly likely that they will lose.⁶ In the academic year 2023/2024, this process cost local authorities £152.8 million (compared to £20.4 million in 2014/2015) and is a major contributing factor the 'SEND crisis' which is seeing many local authorities face bankruptcy.⁷

Finally, there is a great deal more flexibility in the US school system than in the UK. Whilst still considered 'mainstream', high school students have the opportunity to consider vocational, technical or specialised programmes within regular organisations. There is also the ability to retake years or semesters, partake in 'credit recovery' schemes or engage in online learning. A significant caveat to this is that these opportunities vary greatly between districts, and geography can play a huge role in determining whether such placements are accessible. Regardless, however, teachers in US high schools have more flexibility in determining what and how they teach and, importantly, how they assess progress.

In stark contrast, teachers in the UK follow the National Curriculum and performance tables are used to compare schools. Since 2010, schools have been heavily incentivised to follow the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) with a specific focus on academic subjects. Evidence suggests that this is a positive change for many and it is certainly true that quality assuring the US model would have substantial challenges.⁸ However, in the UK, to access anything other than this objectively very narrow curriculum, which has even less focus on creative or

⁶ Appeals to the SEND Tribunal, Official Data: Ministry of Justice, Tribunal Quarterly July-September 2024 [SEND Tribunal stats 2024_2](#)

⁷ NAO: Councils face bankruptcy due to SEND deficits (2024) Local Gov [NAO: Councils face bankruptcy due to SEND deficits | LocalGov](#)

⁸ Changing the Subject, The Sutton Trust (2016) [Changing the subject - The Sutton Trust](#)

practical subjects, students must either have an EHCP which states that specialist provision is required or have multiple placements in mainstream schools broken down, potentially even to the point of permanent exclusion. In practice, this means that many young people need to have 'failed' at their current school in a very long, drawn out process which is very damaging to vulnerable students. Schools, attempting to prevent a permanent exclusion and contending with many conflicting external pressures, will need to simply 'manage' a significant cohort of students, knowing that they will continue to struggle in their current setting.

Students recorded as having special educational needs in the UK have risen dramatically since 2016 from 14% to 19.6% in 2025. Likewise, students with EHCPs were consistently below 3% for many years but rose to 5.3% in 2025 with the trend expected to rise.⁹ Combined with a reduction in qualified, experienced teachers and the narrowing of the curriculum, the rise in students with additional needs has left students, parents and teachers feeling unable to manage. This is particularly true of schools serving socio-economically deprived communities which also welcome a disproportionate number of students with additional needs, alongside layers of additional challenge such as poor housing, mental health struggles, contact with social services and systemic racism.

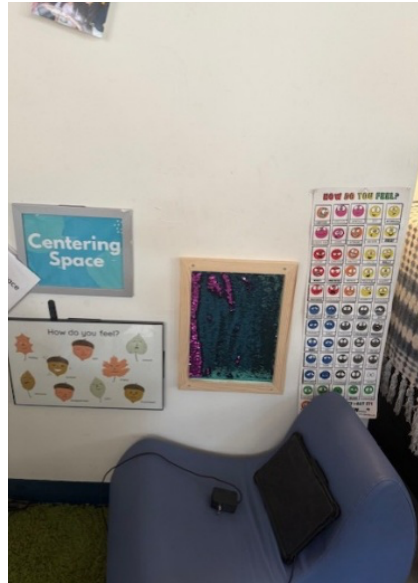
Obtaining a clear picture of what this looks like in the USA is more difficult as each district and state operates under its own interpretation of the law and is subject to funding decisions on a local level. Even IEP guidance, including how long decisions should take and what the specific criteria are, varies tremendously around the country. Additionally, schools use standardised testing in a very different way to the UK and there are different tests available for students with special needs and English learners. However, it is possible to speculate that students with complex needs do not have the guarantee to provision which meets their specific needs under either system. For this project, examples of best practice were most helpful and so the schools visited who had proven positive outcomes can serve as helpful models as to what can be achieved in either context.

⁹ Department for Education, Statements of SEN and EHC Plans: England, 2016, GOV.UK, published 26 May 2016, accessed 12 July 2025.
Department for Education, Education, Health and Care Plans: 2025 Headlines, Explore Education Statistics (GOV.UK), published 26 June 2025, accessed 12 July 2025.

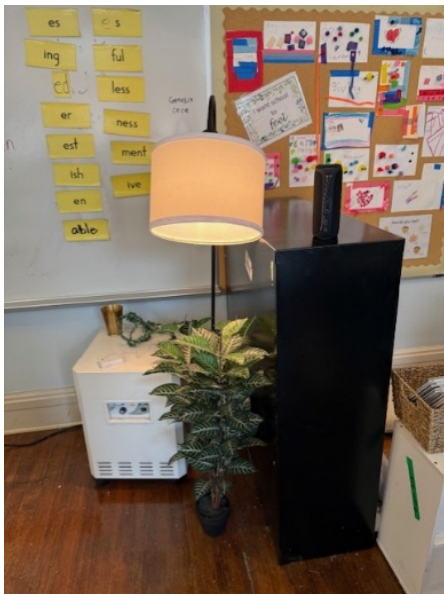
Key Findings from the USA

1. **Wellbeing as the foundation of learning** – There is a shared conviction that a child's wellbeing is just as important as their academic performance, and that true academic success cannot be achieved without emotional wellbeing.

This principle was evident in each setting that was visited. Classrooms all had dedicated areas to explicitly support emotional regulation and intentional choices were made regarding lighting, soft furnishing and plants to support student wellbeing.



Emotional Regulation Areas



Intentional Lighting and Design 1

Staff were all trained in trauma informed practice and had been given specific tools to use restorative approaches that helped build strong and consistent relationships with their young people to foster safety and trust. One example of this was the ‘Language of Safety’ explicitly used in staff training in schools who had adopted the ‘Whole Child Model’ (Appendix B).¹⁰ Used in everything from classroom instruction to restorative conversations, this shared language promoted intentional, respectful dialogue even when under pressure.

2. **Community and belonging as core to success** – A strong sense of community and belonging is viewed as fundamental to every child’s educational journey and overall development. Carefully planned activities make up regular events in the school calendar.

The schools visited all viewed themselves as an extension of the home and a true part of the local community. This was visible in the classrooms as classroom displays all features images of the students and their families. Sadly, these could not be included in this report for privacy reasons but they were very powerful and spoke to the commitment of the school to connect with students and their families and it was helpful way to bring an abstract promise into the classroom. Van Ness Elementary School in Washington was trialling ‘Family Fridays’ as part of their principles of ‘Proactive Relationship-Building’ and ‘Family to Family Community Building’. These events were not without their challenges, namely the work commitments of parents, but the school was attempting to creatively problem solve some of the barriers to a greater feeling of true collaboration between home and school.

Similarly, school rules were framed in such a way that explicit connections were made to how they benefit the school community as a whole. Some schools also used their own students in the corresponding images to promote a feeling of ownership and community.

¹⁰ Language of Safety, Whole Child Model [Language of Safety — Whole Child Model](#)



Community Rules with Visuals 1

3. **Supporting cognition and wellbeing together** – Strategies and tools designed to enhance cognition also play a vital role in supporting young people experiencing stress or trauma.

Classrooms regularly employed tools that supported both learning and emotional regulation. For example, visual timetables, structured routines and scaffolding strategies were used not only to aid comprehension, but also to reduce anxiety and provide predictability. As one teacher put it, ‘visuals create predictability and a feeling of safety’ and this ethos was apparent in teaching and learning as well as whole school routines such as safe use of the hallways.

Staff were trained, through trauma informed theory, to recognise the impact of stress and trauma on attention, memory and executive function. Lessons were adapted to accommodate fluctuations in student engagement and energy, ensuring that cognitive tasks did not overwhelm or disengage learners. All classrooms had snacks available so that students struggling to regulate or focus could manage themselves independently.

Working in collaboration with external professionals, teachers were skilled at using social stories to resolve peer issues as well as supporting routines and understanding abstract concepts. This consistent intertwining of strategies traditionally used outside of the classroom to support cognition and understanding was effective in promoting positive learning environments.

4. **Empowering teachers to nurture emotional learning** – Teachers must be explicitly supported, through training and guidance, to develop their ability to foster emotional learning as an integral part of their professional role.

All schools visited had social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma informed practice embedded within their training offer. They were added to the school calendar in advance and given clear priority. Observing one CPD session in a school and attending the four-day SEL Summer Institute demonstrated that the training is designed to be interactive and promote reflection for teachers. This means that the core principle of compassion is explored in the context of adult–adult relationships as well as adult–student. There is a clear sense that this promotes a culture that puts into practice the expectations the school has for its young people.

One headteacher in particular discussed how he had learnt to be very explicit in his recruitment to ensure that the school attracted people who were already ‘bought in’ to inclusive practice or demonstrated an openness to learn more. He described how job descriptions and performance expectations referenced the responsibility that teachers had to support students’ emotional development and he felt this had helped to build a strong team of educators with a commitment to these shared values.

Similarly, school leaders in these settings modelled emotionally intelligent approaches and real professional relationships. Two teachers explained to me that they greet each other warmly in front of their students. This is partly because of genuine affection but also to model that this is a community they feel valued in and part of.

5. **Dedicated time, training, and resources** – Schools need protected time, high-quality training, and targeted resources to create environments that actively promote and sustain children’s wellbeing.

Coaching programmes were very successful in each of the schools visited. Not only did this continue to foster community and a feeling of being personally invested in, but it also created space for ongoing professional development. When done most effectively, these programmes allowed teachers to reflect on strategies, receive guidance and continually improve their practice.

This programme of development was mapped throughout the year, which allowed space to revisit themes and skills as well as giving the impression that supporting wellbeing is as integral to the role of a teacher as curriculum design and pedagogy.

The schools most invested in student wellbeing were effective when this was replicated in their investment of staff. In practice, this looked like free yoga sessions, staff socials and celebrations as well as flexible working whenever possible. The intention behind such initiatives as these was to promote retention and buy in to a model that requires professionals who are committed to going above and beyond. Similarly, there was an understanding that when staff wellbeing is high, this has a direct positive impact on students.

Teachers often cite the greatest factor affecting their wellbeing as a lack of time and there was evidence that school leaders made meaningful attempts to ensure staff had the time to do what they were being asked. One example shared with me by a teacher was the introduction of 'soft starts' which enabled teachers to spend the first 30 minutes of the school day regulating and connecting with their students before lessons began. He spoke of the importance of having clear, ring-fenced time to put what he was trained to do into practice whilst balancing the demands of the curriculum.

6. **Clear structures and language** – For wellbeing to be fully embedded in school culture, there must be clear frameworks that define how this will be carried out. A consistent, shared language enables staff to discuss an area of education that can be elusive with confidence and coherence. Agreed terminology, documented processes, and scheduled time for reflection and planning review ensure that such practices do not fade away but are sustained and measurable.

To demonstrate a true commitment to sustaining this approach to education, there must be clear processes, models and expectations outlined and made accessible to all staff involved. Transcend's Whole Child Model is a wonderful example of this.¹¹ Created by educators who have spent many years in the classroom, this blueprint is clear and actionable with details considered down to scripts for teachers to use. Having been invited to an 'Inspiration Visit' during which new adopters of the model visited schools where it was more established, it was clear that the creators had worked hard to ensure that the practice was replicable and therefore sustainable in a wide variety of contexts. Whilst the 'why' was at the heart of everything, the model does not lose the practical elements of what good practice looks like on a logistical level and how it can be adapted depending on the situation. Leaders were confident in exploring the model with teachers who work with different demographics and were able to answer questions ranging from the philosophical to the minutiae of planning daily routines.

¹¹ Whole Child Model, Transcend [Whole Child Model](#)

Reflections for UK Schools

Whilst taking part in this project, I repeatedly came back to the same questions when considering how to apply my learnings to a UK context:

- Do teachers in the UK feel that a child's wellbeing is their responsibility?
- Does this answer change depending on whether you are speaking with a primary or a secondary school teacher?
- Does the current teacher training programme take into consideration the level of need in mainstream schools and how this has increased in recent years?
- Would it be helpful for those working in schools to know that they are being asked to do far more than their counterparts in other countries or would this foster resentment?
- Can you create more flexible routes within mainstream education without creating segregation or having lower expectations of some groups?
- How do you avoid a situation where 'alternative curriculums' are overrepresented by SEND and Pupil Premium students?

Recommendations

- **Policy level**

Inclusion frameworks must be established that give schools clear and actionable guidance on how to ensure they are building schools with embedded practices and systems that meet the needs of their most vulnerable students. Alongside this, the Government must make a commitment to incentivise schools to truly be inclusive and to outline what this would look like in practice in the context of academies and zero tolerance behaviour policies. Schools must be guaranteed support if they take action to support students that could negatively impact the current performance measures such as GCSE outcomes and entry into the EBacc.

Whilst the crisis of SEND in mainstream schools has been acknowledged, there now needs to be a clear understanding of what good practice is beyond ethos and vision. This framework will need to be co-created by professionals with sustained experience of managing complex need in a mainstream environment and with true awareness of how unmanageable this has become in the current climate. There are some promising suggestions that there is an appetite for this, such as the thread of inclusion being present in all categories within the new Ofsted framework. This will likely lead to some models of best practice but this will be challenging for schools with particularly high levels of need to replicate and careful consideration must be given to this. Schools must be reassured that if they take bold steps to support SEND and wellbeing that affects their position in the league tables, progress in other areas must be celebrated and publicised. Schools will need a great deal of reassurance if they are to pivot and at present it would feel far too much of a risk for many.

- **Practice level**

Each school's CPD calendar must contain regular, robust opportunities for teachers to build upon their ability to support students with additional needs. This could look similar to the Social Emotional Learning programme in the USA but it will need to be as compulsory as pedagogical or subject specific training if it is to have an impact. Just as the Government focused on curriculum for many years and created a cohesive and robust model for effective planning in this area, so too must there be an established gold standard for schools to work towards, with training that has been approved and sanctioned by the relevant authorities so that schools can feel confident in their planning.

- **Teacher training**

Teacher training must evolve to reflect the changing demographics and responsibilities within the profession. Increasingly, trainee teachers are overrepresented in schools and often placed in positions of significant responsibility

far earlier than intended. This reality demands a shift from traditional training models toward more robust, practice-based preparation that equips trainees not only with subject knowledge and pedagogy but also with leadership, safeguarding, and pastoral skills. Without this adaptation, schools risk relying on underprepared staff to manage complex classroom and organisational challenges, which undermines both educational quality and workforce sustainability. Policy must address this gap by embedding structured mentoring, graduated responsibility, and systemic support into training frameworks to ensure trainees can succeed without being set up to fail.

- **Relationships between stakeholders**

The relationship between local authorities, schools, and parents of children with SEND is deteriorating, and adversarial media narratives are deepening this divide. A systemic lack of transparency fuels mistrust and creates unrealistic expectations, leaving schools vulnerable to criticism when they cannot meet demands that exceed their remit or resources. This is compounded by a persistent misconception that schools operate as rigid, disciplinarian institutions supported by an ecosystem of lawyers, private assessors and social media personas. In reality, the structures often portrayed as archaic – such as routine and high expectations – are essential for supporting vulnerable learners, and they are delivered alongside significant pastoral care. However, this holistic approach is rarely acknowledged in public discourse, skewing perceptions and undermining confidence in the system. The mystery of criteria, funding and thresholds must be removed so that the blanks are not filled in incorrectly. Without this clarity, there will be no way to build trust between these stakeholders and the divide will continue to grow.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet



Success in Mainstream Schools for Students with Complex Needs

Information Sheet for Schools



Ailish Langan, a senior school leader responsible for supporting students with additional needs, has been awarded a Churchill Fellowship for 2024 to visit the U.S.A. and Canada to explore innovative practice used to manage challenging behaviour in a mainstream school.

The aim of this research is to explore:

- Innovative and creative ways to support our students
- Processes and training that empower our colleagues

Why have I been invited?

Your school has been selected to participate in this exciting international research project, recognising your ongoing efforts to ensure an inclusive education for vulnerable students.

Schools have been chosen who have a similar context to those in inner London. They are characterised by diverse student populations and often within communities facing an array of challenges that can impact the outcomes of their young people.

Your school has been identified as an area of outstanding practice and innovation which would continue to benefit from being part of an international network of like-minded professionals.

What does participation involve?

Your school will be visited by Ailish Langan, who is currently working as an Assistant Principal for Inclusion, in February 2025 for approximately one week. Ailish will spend time observing how your school works including the people, systems and policies in place to ensure that students and staff feel supported.

During this time, Ailish will interview some members of staff who work in the area of Inclusion and some of the students who benefit from the additional support provided. Conversations with students will be supported by creative activities and stimuli designed to make the interaction feel safe, enjoyable and interesting for them.

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The research seeks to understand how additional support in your schools works, the processes and characteristics which allow it to function and how it seeks to overcome challenges. Observation is non-judgemental. Whilst observing, Ailish is happy to participate and support learning as appropriate.

What will happen to the data collected?

The data collected from this research project will be used to compile a comprehensive report on excellent practices in inclusion, showcasing the innovative approaches schools like yours are implementing to support diverse and often disadvantaged student populations. This report will not only highlight successful strategies but also serve as a valuable resource for other schools in the UK, providing practical insights that can be adapted to their own contexts. Additionally, the findings will be featured on my personal website, offering wider visibility and sharing your commitment to inclusive education with a global audience. Ailish will ensure the level of privacy your school wishes; all data shared can be anonymised or your school and it's practices can be named if that feels appropriate.

What happens if participants want to withdraw from the research?

Any participant from your school can withdraw from the research at any point with no consequence. If someone withdraws during or after an interview, they will be asked if they consent to the data collected so far being used. If they do not give consent for use, any data collected will be immediately deleted.

What are the advantages or disadvantages of taking part?

One advantage is that you will be able to raise the profile of Inclusion by highlighting the importance of the work that you do with your students on an international level. You will be given the opportunity to think deeply and reflect on how you are able to achieve positive outcomes in the face of complex challenges but also how you can continue to improve on build on your provision. If you wish, you can opt to have a report written by Ailish Langan outlining what your school does well and areas of development.

A disadvantage may be that it can feel exposing to share a part of your school that you may not feel is exemplary. Please be assured that the purpose of this research is to recognise the challenges that schools are facing and to continue to strive for excellence as a network of professionals with shared value. No negative information will be shared that names schools,

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individuals and students. Schools may also be concerned about the additional workload that a project such as this could bring them. Every effort will be made to ensure that this is minimal. Ailish Langan works in a school where the staff have significant time constraints and will work with her point of contact to ensure her visit does not impact staff wellbeing.

What if I have further questions?

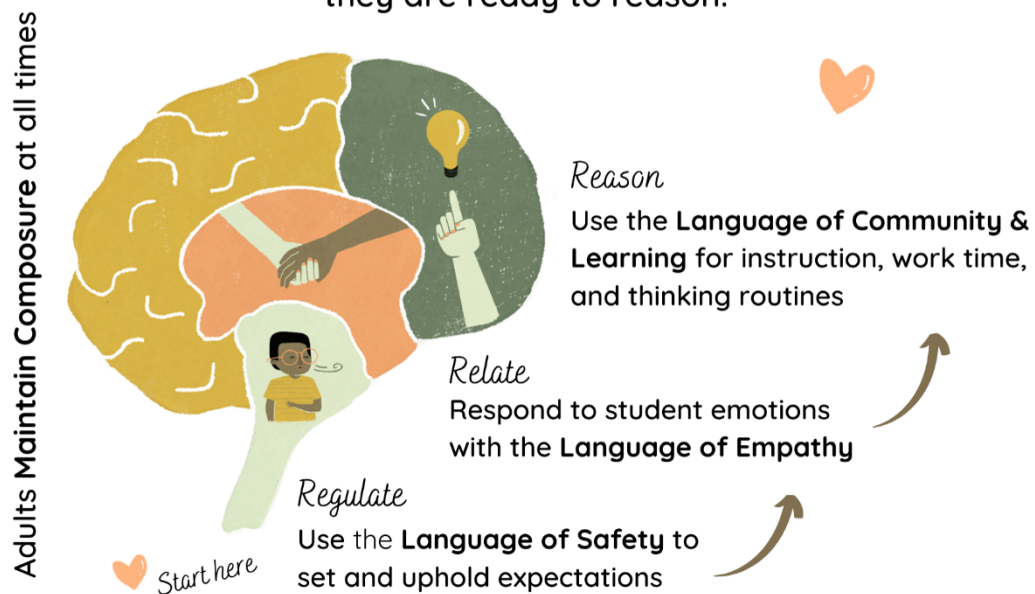
You can contact Ailish Langan at ailish_langan@hotmail.com at any point.

Appendix B: Learning Visual used by Transcend to support with teacher training as part of their teaching of the Whole Child Model

Compassion & Assertiveness: How Practices Fit Together

The Neurosequential Model by Dr. Bruce Perry helps us see how Compassion & Assertiveness practices work together.

When students are regulated and feel related,
they are ready to reason!



[Language of Safety — Whole Child Model](#)

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Appendix C: School Visits and Interviews

Schools visited:

East Side Community High School, New York, New York

Van Ness Elementary School, Washington D.C.

H.D. Cooke Elementary School, Washington D.C.

The Nueva School, San Mateo, California

Interviews conducted:

Kiran Gill, The Difference, 1st September 2024

Christina Kirby, Transend Education, 30th October 2024

Cynthia Robinson-Rivers, Transend Education, 20th November 2024

Erin Thomas, Achievement First, 27th November 2024

Rachel Williams, Transend Education, 25th February 2025

Appendix D: Anonymous High School Teacher Interviews Summaries

Teacher M

Teacher M teaches English at a suburban high school that proudly describes itself as “inclusive.” She explained that, while the language of inclusion is embedded in the school’s policies, the reality often falls short. Students with complex needs are expected to adapt to mainstream classrooms with little differentiation or support. There is limited collaboration between general education and special education staff, and teaching assistants are frequently redeployed due to staffing shortages. “We talk about inclusion a lot,” she said, “but it mostly means putting everyone in the same room and hoping for the best.” Training on trauma-informed or neurodiverse practice is optional and rarely prioritised, leaving teachers to rely on personal experience rather than a shared framework. Teacher M described feeling conflicted — proud of her students’ resilience but frustrated by the institutional gap between intention and action. “We could do so much more,” she reflected, “if we had time, trust, and proper support.”

Teacher Q

Teacher Q teaches social studies in a mid-sized city school that has made deliberate efforts to become more inclusive. Over the past three years, the leadership team has introduced co-teaching models, embedded social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum, and offered ongoing training in trauma-informed practice. Teacher Q noted that these initiatives have begun to change the culture: “We’re still learning, but now when a student is struggling, we ask what happened to them, not what’s wrong with them.” However, he admitted that maintaining consistency is difficult — new staff members often arrive without the same training, and budget cuts threaten support staff positions. Despite these challenges, he believes the shift in mindset has made a tangible difference. “Students who once disengaged are now staying in class longer, and parents tell us they feel heard,” he said. He described the process as “messy but hopeful,” driven by a belief that inclusion is a continual practice, not a fixed state.

Teacher L

Teacher L works in a well-resourced charter school recognised for its inclusive ethos. Every teacher is trained in universal design for learning (UDL), and trauma-informed principles are woven into daily routines. The school has a dedicated wellbeing team, and co-planning between subject and support staff is a non-negotiable part of weekly practice. Teacher L described her school as “a place where everyone belongs by design, not by exception.” She emphasised that inclusion is seen as a shared responsibility, not just the domain of the special education department. The leadership actively models empathy and reflection, and students participate in shaping behaviour policies and support systems. Teacher L acknowledged that maintaining this culture requires constant work: “The second you stop listening to students or assume you’ve ‘arrived,’

you start slipping backwards.” She credits strong communication, protected professional learning time, and a values-driven approach for their success. “It’s not perfect,” she said, “but it feels like the kind of school we all imagined education could be.”

Teacher O

Teacher O teaches science in a large public high school serving a diverse, working-class community. His school has embraced the language of trauma-informed and inclusive education, but systemic pressures often undermine these goals. With class sizes regularly exceeding thirty-five students and limited access to counsellors, teachers are stretched thin. “We’re told to meet every child where they are,” he said, “but some days it feels impossible.” While professional development sessions on inclusion are offered, they’re typically one-off events rather than sustained learning opportunities. Teacher O recounted the frustration of watching colleagues burn out or become disillusioned: “We care deeply, but caring isn’t the same as having capacity.” Despite these constraints, he tries to integrate inclusive strategies within his lessons — flexible grouping, student choice, and trauma-sensitive routines.

Teacher R

Teacher R teaches in a district where many students face multiple adverse experiences, including housing instability and community violence. Her school has a strong sense of mission and a committed staff team, but resources are extremely limited. “We operate in survival mode most of the time,” she admitted. The school partners with local agencies to provide food, mental health support, and mentoring, yet the need consistently exceeds capacity. Teacher R described feeling torn between meeting academic targets and simply helping students feel safe enough to learn. “Our ethos is strong — we believe in these kids — but the system isn’t built for their reality.” Despite the exhaustion, she values the relationships that keep both students and staff going.

Teacher B

Teacher B works in an alternative high school designed for students with complex behavioural and emotional needs. The staff share a deep commitment to restorative and trauma-informed approaches, but sustaining this ethos has proven demanding. “We believe in what we do,” he explained, “but the emotional toll is huge.” With limited external support and frequent staff turnover, maintaining consistency is a struggle. Mr. Davis described how, despite genuine dedication, burnout and compassion fatigue often set in. “When you’re constantly dealing with crisis, it’s hard to find time for reflection or renewal.” He spoke candidly about the tension between philosophy and practicality: “We talk about regulation and resilience, but sometimes we’re the ones running on empty.”