

Evaluation of SEND First

Final report for the City of London Corporation

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the SEND First approach taken up in The City Academy, Hackney, a secondary school that is part of the City Family of schools. The City of London Corporation commissioned us to undertake the evaluation to understand the views of students, parents and staff in relation to the SEND approach implemented in the school.

The City Academy, Hackney, is a mixed, secular secondary school serving the local community. The school has a high proportion of disadvantaged students (approximately 60% of the student population) and an uneven gender split (approximately 60:40 boys: girls). The Academy has higher-than-average numbers of students with SEND. 5% of the student population have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) and 20% of the student population are in the SEND support category.

Over the last three years, the academy has sought to meet the needs of SEND students through the SEND First approach.

2. Context

England's approach to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) has significantly progressed in recent years, partly due to the implementation of more efficient identification and assessment practices (Hodkinson, 2020). These improvements have enabled earlier and more accurate support for children with SEND, contributing to better educational outcomes. At the same time, there has been a growing demand for more inclusive education, driven by increased awareness of the rights of children with SEND and a broader commitment to educational equity (House of Commons Education Committee, 2019). Together, these developments reflect a shift towards a more inclusive education system.

Current government statistics demonstrate that the percentage of students with EHCPs increased from 4.4% in 2016 to 5.3% in 2025, while those receiving SEND support without an EHCP reached 14.2% (DfE, 2025). The increase in the identification of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) reveals a combination of higher awareness among professionals, broader diagnostic criteria, and improved identification practices by schools and local authorities (Department for Education, 2025). This situation has resulted in growing pressure on services and resources, particularly in urban schools with high levels of both SEND and socio-economic disadvantage. Alongside this, students' main support needs have changed in recent years.

Although current legislation promotes inclusion, the implementation of SEND policies and practices continues to vary across different parts of England. The effectiveness and practicality of support for SEND is often affected by several factors, including the available resources, the presence of well-trained staff, and socioeconomic conditions affecting both schools and families (Norwich, 2022; Skipp *et al.*, 2021; Ofsted and CQC, 2022).

The identification of SEND is closely connected to broader socioeconomic and demographic patterns. Research shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds (for instance, those eligible for free school meals) are more likely to be identified with behavioural or communication needs (Strand and Lindorff, 2018; The London Assembly, 2023). Studies show that students from different ethnic backgrounds do not always receive the same type of SEND diagnosis. For example, Black Caribbean students are more often identified with behavioural and emotional difficulties, while South Asian students are less likely to be diagnosed with autism, even when they may show similar signs as their peers, due to cultural misunderstandings, language barriers, or unconscious bias among school staff, raising concerns about fairness in the assessment process (Gill *et al.*, 2017). When these factors are considered, it becomes easier to identify a student's needs and to avoid

making unfair decisions that could compound existing inequalities (Archer, 2020; Strand and Lindorff, 2021).

Recent education reforms in England (DfE, 2019; 2024) have strongly emphasised inclusion, calling on mainstream schools to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, particularly students with SEND. Consequently, a vertical equity model, providing additional support to disadvantaged learners, often through collaboration between mainstream and specialist provisions, has been suggested (OECD, 2021; Smythe, 2025). However, translating policy into classroom practice presents ongoing challenges. Teachers in mainstream schools often operate with limited SEND-specific training and under the pressure of large class sizes, which restricts their ability to apply inclusive pedagogies (Blatchford and Webster, 2018; Smythe, 2025). While national policies mandate inclusive strategies, the day-to-day reality for educators sometimes involves reliance on internal structures utilising SENCOs, support staff, and behaviour specialists to bridge the gap between policy and its practical implementation (Curran and Boddison, 2021; Smythe, 2025). Teachers' collaborative efforts, sharing resources, co-production, individualised adaptive teaching and participating in inter-agency networks, emerge as key mechanisms for inclusion. Adoption of these practices varies significantly across settings. The effectiveness of this policy implementation largely hinges on teachers' professional judgement, adaptive skills, and the institutional support available within schools (Booth and Ainscow, 2011; Webster, 2022).

It is against this background context and the need to implement equitable, consistent and fair SEND support that this evaluation was commissioned.

3. Evaluation Objectives

This evaluation focuses on the SEND First Approach in The City Academy, Hackney with the aim of identifying the impact of the SEND First approach on:

- Student progress (measured through assessment data)
- Student sense of belonging (measured through survey data)
- Staff confidence and expertise (measured through survey data)
- Parent confidence in school support for send (measured through survey data, and case study interviews)

The Brunel research team worked with the Head Teacher at the Academy to recruit students, parents/ carers and teachers to participate. Reference to parents in this study includes anyone with the main responsibility for caring for a child attending the school.

4. Evaluation Process

4.1 Evaluation Overview

To evaluate SEND First we took a three-phase approach to gathering data. The three phases undertaken are as follows:

Phase 1: context review

This initial phase provided context for the study in terms of a short literature review, SEND First process review, and an analysis of Academy assessment data to explore:

- SEND provision for students focusing on local measures taken.
- SEND support for staff focusing on teacher education experiences and CPD/local training provision.
- Assessment outcomes for all students and those with an EHCP.

This context was used by the research team to feed into design of the survey and interview phases, including recruitment, sampling, and question focus.

Phase 2: student/parent/staff surveys

Surveys were shared with students, parents and staff to gauge their views on the SEND provision at The City Academy, Hackney. The surveys were shared widely across students and parents in key stage 3 (years 7-9) to maximise responses. We gained 73 responses from students, 38 from staff and 11 from parents. The surveys asked that parents interested in being interviewed indicate their willingness. The survey for students was designed in collaboration with the Head Teacher at The City Academy and was appropriate for the age group in terms of language and accessibility. The student participants are all categorised as SEND, although not all have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) in place.

Phase 3: parent and student interviews

Case study interviews were conducted with three parents. Take up was disappointing despite the partnership working and excellent support received from the Head Teacher and staff at The City Academy. Interviews were one-to-one, conducted on Teams and lasted up to 30 minutes. The research team were flexible with the timing of interviews recognising parents' work commitments. All interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed prior to analysis.

Prior to commencement, the evaluation received ethical approval from Brunel to ensure informed consent, participant anonymity and confidentiality.

4.2 Context review

The context review involved discussions with the Head Teacher to gain insights into the SEND First approach, teacher CPD and multi-agency working.

SEND First is guided by the following principles:

- SEND students are placed first in the usual practice and procedures of the Academy so that they and their needs are always borne in mind. ***SEND students come first not last.***
- Teachers and support staff are all supported to see themselves as SEND experts with the knowledge and skills to meet their needs (via the usual academy systems and regular, high quality training). ***SEND expertise and accountability is shared not individual.***
- The culture of the academy is that almost always, SEND students' needs can be met in the same spaces and systems as non-SEND students with simple, reasonable adjustment, well-trained staff and a culture of celebrating difference. ***SEND students are included not excluded.***

The SENCO and the wider inclusion faculty (named the Faculty of Learning) liaise with the local authority to engage specialist provision for SEND students. This includes Speech and Language Therapy (SALT) (who are based in the academy), access to specialist teachers (for Visually Impaired

children, Hearing Impaired children and children with ASD), the Educational Psychology service and administrative support from EHCP co-ordinators. The SENCO works closely with these professionals to keep communication open and constructive and to ensure that this support can be maximised. An example of how local provision is used to maximise the SEND First approach is through the work with the SALT team: their focus has increased on in-class interventions and training teachers, rather than small group withdrawal work (inclusive not exclusive).

Staff members at the Academy are regularly trained on meeting SEND students' needs. In accordance with the SEND First approach, training is embedded in all CPD activities: INSET days, regular teaching and learning sessions and is promoted through all lesson observation and monitoring activities. In addition, specific information on effective strategies to support particular special needs or particular students are shared via the "student spotlights" in the weekly teaching and learning bulletin. SEND training is largely delivered by staff in-house (drawing on their expertise developed working with local specialist services) so that training is specific to the Academy's processes and systems and to ensure that SEND expertise is presented as a shared responsibility (not only the preserve of a "specialist" few).

The research team reviewed the progress data for the cohorts evaluated and these demonstrate a positive picture of SEND student progress as follows:

Year 7:

Overall attainment: SEND grade 1+, non SEND grade 2-

Progress: SEND 27% on or above target, non SEND 26% on or above target

Year 8:

Overall attainment: SEND grade 2-, non SEND grade 2+

Progress: SEND 26% on or above target, non SEND 26% on or above target

Year 9:

Overall attainment: SEND grade 3-, non SEND grade 3

Progress: SEND 16% on or above target, non SEND 22% on or above target

These outcomes show no significant difference in progress between SEND and non-SEND students.

4.3 Student Evaluation

The survey was shared widely across years 7, 8 and 9 in the summer term of 2025. Participation was entirely voluntary. Students were provided with form time to complete the survey with support available from teaching staff to help them access, navigate and understand the survey. This support was important given that all students completing the survey have a SEND need.

The survey consisted of a series of demographic questions, quantitative banks of questions measuring understanding, confidence and knowledge of SEND provision, and open-ended questions to capture the students' voice. The questions were co-designed by the research team and The City Academy, Hackney to ensure their accessibility and suitability for the students. All students completed all of the questions confirming the usability of the survey.

4.4 Staff Evaluation

The survey was shared widely across teaching and support staff working with students in years 7, 8 and 9 in the summer term of 2025. The survey consisted of a series of demographic questions, quantitative banks of questions measuring understanding, confidence and knowledge of SEND support, and open-ended questions to capture staff views.

4.5 Parent Evaluation

The survey was shared widely with parents/carers of students in years 7, 8 and 9 in the summer term of 2025. The survey consisted of a series of demographic questions, quantitative banks of questions measuring understanding, confidence and knowledge of SEND support at The City Academy, Hackney, and open-ended questions to capture parent views.

Parents were asked to indicate their willingness to be interviewed at the end of the survey. Parents who completed the interview received a £20 Amazon voucher as a thank you.

4.6 Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data was analysed by the research team using the statistical software Tableau. The data was cleaned, coded, and analysed to identify key patterns and trends, which were then visualized to provide clear insights.

The survey received responses from 73 students and 38 staff members, providing a reasonably strong basis for identifying insights within these groups. However, the parent response rate was significantly lower, with only 11 participants, limiting the representativeness of parental perspectives in the analysis. As a result, conclusions drawn from parent feedback should be interpreted with caution, as it is not a sufficiently sized representative sample of the wider parent community.

Qualitative survey and interview data sets were analysed thematically and extended verbatim quotations are included in italicised text.

5. Evaluation Findings

5.1 Student Evaluation Profile

A total of 73 students responded, spread across years 7, 8 and 9 as follows:

- **Year 7: 26** responses
- **Year 8: 20** responses
- **Year 9: 27** responses

Student response profile is diverse, reflecting the multicultural composition of the wider community. Among the individuals surveyed, 34.7% identified as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, 17.3% as White, 16% as Asian/Asian British, 16% as Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups, 13.3% as belonging to any other ethnic group, and 2.7% identified as Arab.

In terms of sex, the sample consists of 48 males (66%), 24 females (33%), and 1 person (1%) who preferred not to say. The higher proportion of male respondents in the sample is consistent with national trends, where males are statistically more likely to be identified with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the England (DfE, 2025). It is also consistent with the male/female ratio of The City Academy, Hackney.

5.2 Student Evaluation: Quantitative Findings

Students completed a survey formed of three banks of rated questions about their understanding, confidence and knowledge of SEND support at The City Academy, Hackney. Each of the three sections comprised statements to be 'rated' in terms of agreement, confidence and knowledge levels. The findings show that for each section, there was a generally positive or neutral response.

Table 1: Student Understanding of SEND Support

% of students

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I understand the SEND support available at the school	13.6%	65.2%	15.2%	4.5%	1.5%
The school communicates clearly its SEND provision and support	4.7%	64.1%	20.3%	7.8%	3.1%
I understand how the curriculum is differentiated for SEND students	15.0%	45.0%	31.7%	5.0%	3.3%
I understand how the teachers support students with SEND	25.8%	45.5%	21.2%	1.5%	6.1%
I understand how the teaching assistants support students with SEND	25.8%	43.9%	25.8%	4.5%	0.0%
I understand how the behaviour mentors support students with SEND	26.6%	45.3%	14.1%	9.4%	4.7%

Table 1 shows a broadly positive level of understanding among respondents regarding the SEND provision at the school, particularly in relation to available support and the roles of staff. For question 9.1, a combined 78.8% of respondents agreed that they understand the SEND support available. Similarly, 9.2 shows 68.8% agreement that the school communicates its SEND provision clearly, although only 4.7% selected the highest level of agreement, suggesting there may be room for improvement in how communication is perceived.

Agreement of understanding of differentiation in the curriculum (9.3) is slightly lower, with a combined 60.0% of respondents feeling informed, pointing to an opportunity for clearer explanation or visibility of differentiation strategies.

Staff support is better understood, with 71.3% acknowledging teacher support (9.4), and 69.7% understanding the role of teaching assistants (9.5). Behaviour mentors (9.6) are also well recognised, with a combined 71.9% understanding their role in supporting SEND students.

Overall, while most respondents demonstrate a positive awareness of SEND structures in the school, there are some areas—particularly curriculum differentiation and communication clarity—that could benefit from more explicit sharing of practice and provision.

Table 2: Student Confidence

% of students

	Very confident	Fairly confident	Neither confident or unconfident	Not very confident	Not at all confident
Speak with teachers about your learning	23.6%	44.4%	20.8%	9.7%	1.4%
Speak with teaching assistants about your learning	15.7%	57.1%	20.0%	5.7%	1.4%
Speak with behaviour mentors about your learning	27.9%	34.4%	23.0%	8.2%	6.6%
Speak with your parent/carer about your learning at home	51.4%	34.3%	7.1%	5.7%	1.4%
Complete your homework	56.9%	24.6%	15.4%	3.1%	0.0%
Attend school	59.4%	20.3%	11.6%	7.2%	1.4%
Participate in school activities/events	29.0%	34.8%	24.6%	4.3%	7.2%

Table 2 indicates that most students are confident to actively engage in their learning, particularly through discussions with teachers and teaching assistants, with 68% and 72.8% respectively reporting they feel confident to do so. However, fewer students (61.3%) feel confident to engage with behaviour mentors about their learning. A large majority (85.7%) feel confident to speak with their parent/ carer about learning at home, highlighting the importance of home support. Additionally, most students feel confident completing homework (81.5%) and attending school (79.7%). Confidence to participate in school activities or events shows more variation, with 63.8% feeling confident to take part at least sometimes, suggesting room for building confidence in relation to extracurricular opportunities.

Table 3: Student Knowledge of SEND Support

% of students

	Good knowledge	Reasonable knowledge	Basic knowledge	Limited knowledge	No knowledge
The academic year, including	28.8%	41.1%	15.1%	8.2%	6.8%

testing/examination schedules					
School extracurricular activities/clubs/enrichment opportunities	29.2%	36.1%	13.9%	11.1%	9.7%
The transition from one year group to another	36.6%	32.4%	16.9%	4.2%	9.9%

Table 3 highlights varied levels of knowledge across three key areas within the school environment. For the academic year and examination schedules, a majority ((69.9%) agree they have good or reasonable knowledge, though a notable share of students express basic or limited knowledge. Knowledge of extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities show a slightly lower but comparable level of knowledge, with 65.3% having good or reasonable knowledge. Knowledge of the transition from one year group to another has the highest knowledge rating, with nearly 69% of students having good or reasonable knowledge, suggesting this is an area of relative strength.

5.3 Student Evaluation: Qualitative Findings

The survey carried qualitative questions on what, if anything, the school does well to support their learning and what, if anything, the school could do to further support their learning. The responses were coded around the following themes: teacher support, understanding questions and instruction, extra time for assessments, learning resources, and teaching assistants.

Teacher Support

The key findings in response to teacher support are as follows:

In the school the teachers support me really well in my learning and give me extra help.

They give support to people who need help.

Yes, I think the school helps most of the time.

Teachers do help with support, and they do well and make changes.

Yes, they support me a lot and help me if I am struggling. They also give me a laptop to support me with my dyslexia.

The school supports me in my learning by setting targets that I need to meet by the end of the year.

The teachers help all students understand the content to help us learn.

I understand every lesson clearly.

This was the strongest theme in the qualitative comments with 20 students commenting on the importance of teacher support. Students with SEND feel well-supported in their learning at school. Teachers and teaching assistants are praised for providing extra help, making necessary

adjustments, and ensuring lessons are accessible and clearly understood. Support is often personalised, such as providing laptops for students with dyslexia or setting individual learning targets. Although there are occasional mentions of limited support in certain areas, such as having only one TA in a subject, students generally feel that the school is responsive to their needs and committed to helping them succeed.

Understanding Questions and Instructions

Fifteen students identified support given to ensure understanding lesson requirements, as follows:

They make sure you understand the question.

The school asks me if I understand the question/sentence and if I don't understand they will make sure that I know the question/sentence and will help me (in homework club).

If I do not understand a question, they repeat the same question asked and check my understanding and knowledge.

The responses reiterate that students with SEND feel supported by the school. Teachers and support staff take time to clarify or repeat questions when needed and offer additional help through resources like homework club to reinforce understanding and build confidence.

Extra Time and Assessment Support

Eight students noted the importance of extra time and support with assessments. Illustrative comments are as follows:

I think that the school giving extra time to complete assessments is very helpful to my learning as more time to do things allows me to feel calmer and more confident when completing them.

Revision lessons, plenary, homework and knowledge organisers.

Doing my homework because it helps me with my work.

The responses confirm that receiving extra time for assessments, along with support tools like revision lessons, plenaries, homework, and knowledge organisers, helps improve learning by boosting confidence, calmness, and understanding.

Learning Resources and Tools

Learning resources and tools were also noted by eight students with the following comments highlighting key areas:

I do sometimes make use of the library.

Speech and language.

An extra set of introduction days with a group of other children.

They give all students knowledge organiser based on their key stage as it stores all the crucial knowledge and topics we've went throughout the year, as well as providing a homework source.

The students use the library, and several benefit from speech and language support, as well as additional induction days with peers to aid transition. Knowledge organisers, tailored to each key

stage, are also highlighted as a valuable resource for reviewing key topics and supporting homework throughout the year.

Teaching Assistants (TA)

Teaching assistants were important and noted by seven students as follows:

Provides TAs to assist in class.

Yes, they support me a lot and help me if I am struggling. They also give me a laptop to support me with my dyslexia.

They help us and support when we need it even though I have only 1 TA in maths.

TA supports me by helping me when I'm confused.

TAs provide valuable support in class, particularly for students who may struggle or need additional help. One student noted that TAs offer consistent assistance, including access to a laptop to support their dyslexia. Although TA support is limited in some subjects, such as only having one TA in maths, the help provided is appreciated and contributes positively to their learning experience.

Most students feel well supported by teaching assistants. They mention being helped with understanding lessons and questions. The key findings are summarised as follows:

- **Focus on Understanding:** There is a strong emphasis on teachers making sure students understand questions and instructions, often by repeating or clarifying.
- **Extra Time and Calm Environment:** Students appreciate extra time for assessments and support that helps them feel calmer and more confident.
- **Useful Resources:** Knowledge organisers, homework clubs, and technology aids like laptops are valuable tools for learning support.

Areas for Improvement: A few students suggest clearer instructions and more targeted support for special needs such as speech and language or dyslexia. Several students identified that there should be more teaching assistants in more classes to support their learning. Finally, students suggested that the school could create both a homework club and a revision club where students 'go to a certain room based on what they want to revise'.

5.4 Staff Evaluation Profile

Among the staff sample, the majority of respondents (67.5%) identified as White (including British and other White backgrounds), followed by 10% identifying as Asian or Asian British, 10% as Black, African, Caribbean or Black British, 5% as from any other ethnic group, and 2.5% identifying as mixed or multiple ethnic backgrounds.

Out of the 38 respondents, 75.7% identified as female, 18.9% as male, and 5.4% preferred not to disclose their sex.

5.5 Staff Evaluation: Quantitative Findings

Staff completed a survey formed of three banks of rated questions about their understanding, confidence and knowledge of SEND support at The City Academy, Hackney. Each of the three

sections comprised statements to be 'rated' in terms of agreement, confidence and knowledge levels. The findings show that for each section, there was a generally positive or neutral response.

Table 4: Staff Understanding of SEND Approach

% of staff

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I understand the SEND approach	68.4%	31.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
I understand how SEND support is available daily	57.9%	39.5%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%
The school communicates clearly its SEND provision	60.5%	36.8%	2.6%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 4 highlights that 97.4% staff agree that they understand how SEND support is available daily and 97.3% agreeing that the school communicates its SEND provision clearly. Only 2.6% expressed uncertainty in each case, and no respondents disagreed with either statement.

Table 5: Staff Understanding of Relationships

% of staff

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The school celebrates difference and diversity	68.4%	23.7%	5.3%	2.6%	0.0%
The school celebrates the achievements of all children	43.2%	45.9%	5.4%	5.4%	0.0%
It is important that all children attend school as much as possible	94.6%	5.4%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

Table 5 highlights that most respondents (92.1%) felt the school celebrates difference and diversity. Additionally, 89.1% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the school celebrates the achievements of all children, indicating a strong overall positive perception of relationships. Respondents also strongly agreed (94.6%) that regular school attendance is important for all children.

Table 6: Staff Knowledge

% of staff

	Good knowledge	Reasonable knowledge	Basic knowledge	Limited knowledge	No knowledge
Support for students' learning	73.7%	21.1%	5.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Support for extracurricular activities	24.3%	37.8%	24.3%	10.8%	2.7%

Table 6 shows that nearly three quarters of respondents (73.7%) have good knowledge of support for students' learning, with no one indicating limited or no knowledge. In contrast, knowledge of support for extracurricular activities was more mixed, with less than a quarter (24.3%) of respondents reporting good knowledge, while 13.5% indicated limited or no knowledge in this area.

Table 7: Staff Confidence

% of staff

	Very confident	Fairly confident	Neither confident or unconfident	Not very confident
Learners with SEND use support	23.7%	63.2%	10.5%	2.6%

Table 7 shows strong overall confidence in how learners with SEND use support, with 86.9% of respondents feeling either very confident (23.7%) or fairly confident (63.2%).

5.6 Staff Evaluation: Qualitative findings

The staff survey carried a qualitative question asking what, if anything, does the school do well in relation to children's experiences of being in school. Nine teacher responses have been coded into the following themes: inclusive environment and belonging, broad curriculum, pastoral support, SEND provision, behaviour management and student voice.

Inclusive Environment and Belonging

The school creates a welcoming and inclusive environment where children feel safe and valued. There's a strong sense of community, and positive relationships between staff and students help children feel supported throughout the school day.

Celebration of diversity and each other whenever possible.

Celebration of achievements, create a strong sense of belonging within the classroom, through the different pathways offered and the extra curricular offering. Student voice opportunities, student leadership opportunities.

The school celebrates the diversity of the school incredibly well - through 'diversity day' and assemblies, Pride Month, Black History Month, the focus on neurodiversity and assemblies which include staff who are neurodiverse and talking about their experiences.

Celebrating diversity with things such as culture day and neurodivergence awareness week.

The school is extremely inclusive and offers all students the opportunity to excel inside and outside the classroom.

Children's needs are taken into account when planning the curriculum and in teaching practice.

Celebrating diversity and extra curricular offerings.

Staff commented positively on the environment. Teachers confirmed that the school fosters a welcoming and inclusive environment where students feel safe, valued, and supported. A strong sense of community is evident through positive relationships between staff and students, as well as a commitment to celebrating diversity in meaningful ways, such as through Culture Day, Pride Month, Black History Month, and Neurodivergence Awareness Week. The school actively promotes student voice and leadership opportunities, and its wide range of extracurricular activities and differentiated learning pathways help create a strong sense of belonging. Inclusivity is embedded in teaching practices and curriculum planning, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed both in and out of the classroom.

Curriculum, Creative Opportunities and Extra-Curricular Activities

Students are provided with a broad and diverse curriculum. Students have the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of quality extra-curricular activities.

Providing creative and sporting opportunities. Praising and rewarding successes.

The city experience provides students with a broad and balanced curriculum to ensure they have the opportunity to become well-rounded citizens and have access to not just the academic side of school but also sporting, linguistic, personal and creative sides as well.

The school is very insistent in getting all students involved in extracurricular activities especially within the drama/ music department. I have seen first hand how great of a positive impact this has on the students and their feeling of belonging to the school.

They have good access to creative subjects - art, music, drama which gives space for students to express themselves - especially those students with SEND that may not typically thrive in more academic subjects.

Strong music and sports provisions which adds to the children's experience in a positive way.

Teachers taught to cater lessons to SEND students first.

According to staff, students benefit from a broad and diverse curriculum that balances academic, creative, sporting, and personal development opportunities. The school places a strong emphasis on encouraging participation in extracurricular activities, particularly in drama, music, and sports, which positively impacts students' sense of belonging and well-being. Creative subjects like art, music, and drama provide important outlets for self-expression, especially for students with SEND who may thrive more in these areas. Additionally, the curriculum and teaching practices are designed to be inclusive, with tailored support and in-class assistance to meet the needs of all learners.

Support Systems and Pastoral Care

Students have various levels of pastoral support available to them e.g. mentors, tutors, heads of year.

The school has a brilliant relationship with parents - the pastoral team know their students really well, which helps to build the importance of school for the students.

Positive praise; strong support systems to help children who are struggling; offer a range of opportunities and extra-curricular activities.

Pastoral curriculum, trips, transition support (6-7, and other important transitions), tailored support for different children, school systems that support SEND students to navigate school in familiar and predictable ways.

Intervention provided in the form of Games Club provides a place for children to feel safe and work on the social skills at lunchtimes and ASPACE counselling. I also believe that staff really care about the students and want to make it a safe and happy place for them.

The transition group for our Y7 EHCP and vulnerable students is also really supportive.

Strong and efficient support through TAs and the TAs role in the school and in the classroom.

Great training for TAs. Great understanding from most teachers about the diversity of learning in the classroom and how the teachers implement the SEND first approach. Kind and caring teachers that make students feel safe. Interventions that aim to support children.

Staff recognise the strong pastoral support in the school. Students benefit from a comprehensive pastoral support system that includes mentors, tutors, and heads of year, fostering strong relationships between staff, students, and parents. The school offers tailored support through interventions like Games Club and ASPACE counselling, as well as dedicated transition programs for vulnerable and SEND students to help them navigate school life with confidence. Teaching assistants play a crucial role in providing classroom and extracurricular support, supported by excellent training and a SEND-first approach from teachers. Daily tutor time and a focus on celebrating student achievements further contribute to creating a safe, caring, and supportive environment where all students can thrive.

SEND Provision and Accessibility

The school also has nurture sets in core subjects which I have observed to be extremely beneficial due to the small class size, TA support and heavily differentiated lessons. Unfortunately, these nurture groups will be cut next year due to funding issues.

As much as possible students are supported to be able to access the same work and opportunities regardless of their SEND status.

Staff are encouraged to build strong relationships with students in order to best understand and support them.

The school creates reliable routines e.g. with lineups and beginnings of lessons, which help the students feel like they know what to expect every day and what is expected from them. This can be beneficial for SEND students in particular as it reduces uncertainty.

Teachers taught to cater lessons to send students first.

Allows children of all backgrounds and needs to feel safe, cared for and celebrated.

Eight staff commented on the positive SEND provision. The school offers nurture sets in core subjects, which provide valuable small-class support and differentiated lessons, though these groups face potential cuts due to funding constraints. Staff prioritize building strong relationships with students to better understand and meet their needs, while consistent routines help create a

predictable and safe environment—especially beneficial for SEND students. Teachers are trained to design lessons with SEND learners in mind first, ensuring inclusivity and access to the same opportunities for all students. Overall, the school fosters calm, well-managed learning spaces where children from all backgrounds feel safe, cared for, and celebrated.

Behaviour, Consistency and Expectations

Producing a consistent experience as a result of all staff following the same structures and routines, using the same language for behaviour management interactions and sanctions.

The school creates clear structures and consistency in delivering these that, I think, helps students feel safe, comfortable and supported at school.

Warm-strict tone used regularly across school. Clear sense of routine and structure, but delivered with warmth so students understand that rules are designed for their benefit.

The warm strict approach works well with all students, helping them understand where the behaviour boundaries lie without raising our voices.

The school has a drive on attendance to ensure that students are supported through school to minimise absence issues (I don't think many schools have a Welfare officer these days).

I think behaviour management is overall quite good which means students' experiences are not as negatively impacted by disruption in classrooms or significant problems with bullying.

According to eight staff, the school maintains a consistent and structured environment by ensuring all staff follow the same routines and use a unified approach to behaviour management. This warm-strict tone balances clear expectations with care, helping students understand behavioural boundaries without harshness. Clear communication of expectations and a strong focus on attendance support students' success and wellbeing. Additionally, the school takes bullying seriously and actively challenges it, contributing to a positive and safe atmosphere where classroom disruptions are minimized and students can thrive.

Student Voice and Relationships

Student voice opportunities, student leadership opportunities.

Listen to the students, have a whole school SAM approach, be very supportive and have a warm but strict approach.

High expectations but high support.

Communicates effectively to students about purpose of education and the role the school community has within it.

Care about students' wellbeing.

I believe teachers make good efforts to communicate closely with a child/young person's parent or carer and therefore ensure holistic support for that student.

The school actively promotes student voice and leadership opportunities, fostering a supportive environment that balances warmth with clear expectations. There is a strong emphasis on listening to students and maintaining high standards alongside robust support. Communication is effective in helping students understand the purpose of their education and their role within the school

community. Additionally, teachers work closely with parents and carers to provide holistic support, demonstrating genuine care for students' wellbeing and overall development.

The findings can be summarised as follows:

Inclusive Environment: The school creates a welcoming, safe, and inclusive atmosphere where diversity is celebrated, and all students feel valued.

Broad Curriculum and Opportunities: Students have access to a wide-ranging curriculum with strong creative, sporting, and extracurricular offerings.

Strong Pastoral Support: Well-established pastoral care includes mentoring, transition support, and targeted interventions, fostering student wellbeing.

SEND Provision: SEND students receive tailored support through differentiated teaching, nurture groups, and predictable routines, despite some funding challenges.

Consistent Behaviour Management: Clear, warm-strict behaviour policies promote a safe, respectful, and structured environment.

Student Voice and Relationships: Students have leadership opportunities, and staff maintain close communication with students and parents to support holistic development.

Teachers were further asked what, if anything, could the school do to improve children's experiences of being in school? Responses were coded in relation to three key areas: inclusion and support, student voice and behaviour management. The responses to each of these are as follows:

Inclusion, SEND Support and Equity

I think reasonable adjustment of the behaviour policy for SEND is patchy/inconsistent. This means some teachers may give a student more leniency because they are taking their needs into account, but then that student might walk into the next lesson and receive a sanction for the exact same behaviour. This can be really confusing and frustrating for the students as the behaviour expectations feel changeable - and can sometimes cause further issues due to their emotional reaction to the sanction.

The school policy is to treat all students the same when it comes to the behaviour policy. I believe this discriminates against some students with SEND as they are punished for talking in line for example when their needs make it very hard for them to focus in science for long periods of time. The school focuses far too much on punishments for "poor" behaviour rather than making school an inspiring place which is fun and where students want to come every day.

I feel like there are groups of SEN students (especially those who display disruptive behaviour in lessons) that the school has a hard time dealing with. These students typically end up with many detentions, removals and days in the reflection room. This typically happens because they are held to the same standards as other students in terms of their behaviour, but I think there's work to be done to provide a greater level of equity for these students.

Include more opportunities in the timetable for both students and teachers to have one-to-one or small group discussions around their support needs and how to meet these (and to follow up). Issues around SEN support as well as mental health concerns often come up when tutors call home, for example, but time-pressures can make it difficult to follow-up on or discuss these.

Ensure students feel heard (student voice) and safe to express themselves without feeling like they are in trouble or on edge. It's a very strict school which makes it hard for some SEN students to feel successful/ follow the high expectations without being sanctioned, leading to a disproportionate amount of SEND students getting into trouble.

Training on trauma informed teaching and approaches. Training on restorative measures instead of punitive.

Ten staff noted areas for improvement. While there is increased TA support for students with SEND, the application of behaviour policies for these students is inconsistent, leading to confusion and frustration when expectations vary between lessons. The school's approach to treating all students equally in behaviour management can unintentionally disadvantage SEND students, particularly those who struggle with certain expectations due to their needs. This can result in a higher number of detentions and exclusions for some SEND students, highlighting a need for greater equity and understanding. There is also a call for better integration of SEND learning strategies for teachers, more opportunities for one-on-one support discussions, improved access to student passports, and enhanced communication about student needs. Additionally, promoting student voice and creating a supportive environment where SEND students feel safe and heard—alongside training in trauma-informed and restorative practices—could help reduce anxiety and improve outcomes for these learners.

Student Voice, Relationships and Expression

Ensure students feel heard (student voice) and safe to express themselves without feeling like they are in trouble or on edge.

I think there could be more student voice on the rules of the school.

Increase the presence and extend engagement in student council. It is there but, not always sure what is happening.

We are doing most things but maybe give them more time to express themselves.

End of year achievements with broader focus so that not only academic success is celebrated.

Continue to work on tutor/pastoral time so all students are confident they have a trusted adult.

According to six staff, the school could go further to ensure all students feel heard and safe to express themselves without fear of judgment or sanction. There is a desire for greater student involvement in shaping school rules and for increased visibility and engagement of the student council, which currently lacks clear communication about its activities. Expanding opportunities for student expression and broadening the focus of end-of-year achievements beyond academics are seen as valuable steps. Continued efforts to strengthen tutor and pastoral time aim to ensure every student feels they have a trusted adult to support them.

Structure, Behaviour Policy and Environment

We as staff often go very harsh/strict very quickly to maintain control or authority in interactions and that feels more aggressive than is often necessary. Students don't have a lot of opportunity or space to be heard. If students are expected not to do certain things, those things should not be accessible.

Hard to determine. Maybe it is too strict and at times this can create a divide between students and teachers but perhaps this is a necessary part of creating a safe environment.

With additional studies once a week the school day can be quite long for the students who need to go to a detention afterwards. Year 11 seem to struggle when they are at school during the exam period (instead of being on study leave), especially those with a high level of need.

Less strict on STAR. Less punitive measures and less strict environment. Less authoritative language from staff towards children. Less screaming at children. Smaller classes. More TA support in every class. Less focus on grades more on learning.

Support parents to understand school behaviour policy.

Five staff feel that they have to adopt a strict and sometimes harsh approach to maintain control, which limit opportunities for students to be heard. While this strictness may be seen as necessary for creating a safe environment, it can also create a divide between students and teachers. Some students, particularly Year 11s during exam periods, struggle with the long school days compounded by detentions and additional studies. There are calls for a less punitive, more supportive environment with smaller classes, increased TA support, and a focus on learning rather than grades. Additionally, better support for parents to understand the behaviour policy could help align expectations and improve the overall school climate.

Inclusion, SEND Support and Equity: Behaviour policies for SEND students are inconsistently applied, causing confusion and disadvantaging some learners, especially those with disruptive behaviour. This leads to higher detentions and exclusions, showing a need for more tailored support, better communication, and training in trauma-informed and restorative approaches.

Student Voice, Relationships and Expression: Students need more opportunities to be heard and involved in rule-making. The student council requires greater visibility, and achievements beyond academics should be celebrated. Strengthening tutor and pastoral support will help students feel connected to trusted adults.

Structure, Behaviour Policy and Environment: Staff often use strict behaviour management, which can feel harsh and create divides with students. Long days and detentions challenge high-need students. There's a call for a more supportive environment with smaller classes, more TA support, focus on learning over grades, and better parent engagement with behaviour policies.

In response to the question '**what, if anything, does the school do well in relation to children's experiences of learning**', teacher comments were coded around three themes: SEND First approach, teaching strategies, and personalised learning.

SEND First Approach

SEND First approach means that we aim to use the 'low threshold, high ceiling' approach where all students can access the learning but also all students will feel challenged. The best departments do this very well (English, Creative subjects).

SEND First approach and easily actionable intervention such as the learning journey and changing the seating plan.

SEND first approach prioritises SEND students, benefiting all students.

SEND First approach to teaching means that children are included in the classroom. The training provided for staff on this approach is excellent. Generally, teachers very receptive/responsive to feedback about adapting for children's needs and want to support those children as far as possible in the classroom.

Driving the SEND first approach through staff training/briefings/bulletins.

The school is working hard to promote a culture of SEND first, this is great and very helpful as I feel like I have an arsenal of strategies to use in my everyday teaching.

Lessons are planned with SEND-first strategies in mind. Presentations and worksheets are often dual-coded, meaning they have a greater chance of being accessible immediately rather than having to be adapted to students on an ad-hoc basis.

There were positive statements about SEND First from seven staff who noted that it prioritizes inclusion by ensuring all students can access learning while feeling challenged, with strong implementation in subjects like English and the creative arts. Staff training on this approach is highly valued, equipping teachers with effective strategies such as adaptable seating plans and dual-coded materials. The culture of SEND First is actively promoted through regular briefings and resources, leading to responsive teaching that supports diverse student needs consistently across classrooms.

Teaching Quality and Strategies

High expectations and high support, particularly in English. Good quality of teaching. Excellent staff training leads to high support and invaluable consistency.

Using CPD, teachers are aware of what makes an effective lesson and this probably provides consistency across the school (i.e.: learning journeys in all classrooms/ use of STAR...)

Teacher training means that T&L is of a high quality.

Focus on 'every second counts' and lesson time being 'sacred'.

Provides high quality of teaching and learning to the majority of students. Provides detailed feedback.

Staff training is regular, systems are strong and embedded throughout the school, curriculums are reviewed and tailored regularly, extracurricular opportunities for all.

Seven staff noted the teaching strategies as a strength. They commented that the school maintains high expectations alongside strong support, especially in English, backed by excellent staff training that promotes consistency and high-quality teaching. Regular CPD ensures teachers understand effective lesson practices, such as using learning journeys and the STAR approach, emphasizing that every moment in class is valuable. The school delivers detailed feedback, regularly reviews curricula, and offers a wide range of extracurricular opportunities, creating a well-rounded and supportive learning environment for most students.

Personalisation and Differentiation

Easily actionable intervention such as the learning journey and changing the seating plan.

Student Learning Profiles produced and updated regularly by the Faculty of Learning are in an easy to use format and provide useful information and practical strategies to support the learning needs of individual students.

Personalised and regularly reviewed SLP's ensure strategies for all SEND students are available.

Adapting lessons and providing bespoke support when possible.

Four staff commented on personalisation noting that the school implements easily actionable interventions like learning journeys and flexible seating plans to support student needs. Student Learning Profiles (SLPs), regularly produced and updated by the Faculty of Learning, offer practical,

user-friendly strategies tailored to individual students. These personalized and frequently reviewed SLPs ensure that SEND students receive appropriate, targeted support, with lessons adapted wherever possible to meet diverse learning needs.

Finally, in response to the question ‘what, if anything, could the school do to improve children’s experiences of learning’, teacher comments were coded around three themes: SEND First, teaching strategies, and student engagement.

SEND First Approach

SEND profiles that are focused on actions, making this more easily accessible on platforms such as PAM.

I believe we could do more to ensure teaching and support staff are adopting SEND first practice consistently in their classroom to improve the experience of SEN students. Supporting all staff to implement strategies on students' SLP's and encouraging staff to reflect on own quality first teaching and differentiation are targets I think we can work on.

Not all departments seem to take on board some of the school's strategies for SEND support. For example, there are only a few subjects where I have seen dual-coding for frequently used vocabulary even though this has been shown to be very effective across subjects. I think there can be a disconnect between the training we receive (which I think some departments see as not applicable to them) and what is done in the classroom. The result of that is some lessons are more of a positive experience for SEND students and some are less so.

Mixed ability classes in core subjects can sometimes be tricky in terms of enhancing all student's experiences of learning, as there are such a wide range of needs in some classes and teachers and TAs can be stretched very thinly.

A more differentiated approach to homework could be more supportive for our SEND students - e.g. KO homework is difficult when writing/short term memory is challenging.

Lessons could facilitate a greater degree of student participation - especially during double periods - to support particular SEND needs such as ADHD.

Six staff identified that the consistent adoption of SEND First practices across classrooms remains an area for development. Some departments are not fully implementing strategies from students’ learning profiles, and there is a noticeable gap between training and classroom practice, leading to inconsistent experiences for SEND learners. Mixed-ability classes in core subjects can be particularly challenging, with wide-ranging needs often stretching teachers and TAs. Staff also highlighted the need for more differentiated homework tasks, especially for students with memory or writing difficulties. Increasing student participation—particularly during double periods—would better support those with attention-related needs such as ADHD.

Teaching Quality and Strategies

Continuing focus on driving understanding around how to ensure all activities, all instructions and all assessments are as accessible as possible.

More consistency in the quality of provision across ALL departments.

I think there needs to be a great level of differentiation within KS3. I don't think it's fair that students in lower sets are expected to cover the exact same content as higher attain sets and

also sit the same exams. This puts pressure on teachers to just cover the material when we could work more effectively if we could focus on key principles and slow down the pace.

Continuing to focus on teacher training.

Five staff noted a need for greater consistency in the quality of provision across departments, particularly at Key Stage 3. The current expectation for lower-attaining sets to follow the same content and sit the same exams as higher sets can create unnecessary pressure and limit effective teaching. A more flexible, differentiated approach would allow teachers to prioritise core concepts and adjust the pace accordingly. Continued investment in teacher training is seen as essential to embedding these practices consistently school-wide.

Teaching quality is generally strong, but variation across departments affects consistency. Greater differentiation, especially at KS3, is needed to match content and assessments to student needs. Continued staff training and a focus on accessible teaching strategies remain key priorities.

Student Engagement and Motivation

Build mutual respect with students to improve their attitudes towards teachers. Everyone needs to uphold the 'warm' to the 'warm strict' approach - including SLT - to reduce the number of lesson removals.

To further improve learning experiences, the school could increase hands-on, projects-based activities and provide more different instructions to meet the needs of both advanced and those who need additional support such as Science projects, building mini ecosystem, practical construction courses, cross-curricular subjects to build a city using Art/Science/Maths and DT (STEM).

Utilising a variety of approaches e.g. making use of laptops, student led presentations. (Very difficult to find the time but it might help boost engagement).

More creativity. Less going from one classroom to the next to stare at a screen in silence. It's extremely boring for the students and as a result they do not enjoy school and are not inspired to learn. Too much screen time - students are constantly told not to be on their phones too much but then when they come to school they are looking at screens all day in the classrooms. Making learning more interactive and collaborative between departments. More trips to make use of the incredible opportunities London has to offer.

Less focus on grades and more on learning. More engaged and active classrooms. More creativity and room for error.

According to five members of staff, building stronger mutual respect between students and teachers could reduce behaviour issues and lesson removals. There is a call for more engaging, hands-on, and creative learning experiences, including project-based work, practical STEM activities, and student-led tasks. Reducing screen time and increasing variety in lesson delivery would help re-energise learning and better motivate students. A shift in emphasis from grades to meaningful learning, along with more trips and cross-curricular opportunities, could further enrich the student experience and support deeper engagement.

Student engagement would benefit from more interactive, creative, and collaborative learning. Reducing screen time, increasing hands-on projects and trips, and balancing the warm-strict approach could improve motivation. A shift from grade focus to learning focus is also recommended.

SEND First Approach: is supported by accessible, action-based profiles, but consistent implementation remains a challenge. Some departments are not fully applying recommended

strategies like dual-coding or differentiated homework, leading to unequal experiences for SEND students. Mixed-ability classes and limited TA support further impact inclusion.

Teaching Quality and Strategies: teaching quality is generally strong, but variation across departments affects consistency. Greater differentiation, especially at KS3, is needed to match content and assessments to student needs. Continued staff training and a focus on accessible teaching strategies remain key priorities.

Student Engagement and Motivation: Student engagement would benefit from more interactive, creative, and collaborative learning. Reducing screen time, increasing hands-on projects and trips, and balancing the warm-strict approach could improve motivation. A shift from grade focus to learning focus is also recommended.

5.7 Parent Evaluation: Profile

Among the parent/ carer sample, 45% identified as White (including English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, and other White backgrounds), 27% as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, and 9% each as Asian British (Indian), Mixed ethnic groups, and other ethnic groups.

Out of the 11 respondents, 27% are male and 73% are female.

5.8 Parent Evaluation: Quantitative Findings

Parents completed a survey formed of three banks of rated questions about their understanding, confidence and knowledge of SEND support at The City Academy, Hackney. Each of the three sections comprised statements to be 'rated' in terms of agreement, confidence and knowledge levels. The findings show that for each section, there was a generally positive or neutral response.

Table 8: Parent Confidence

% of parents

	Very confident	Fairly confident	Neither	Not very confident	Not at all confident
Speak with staff about your child's learning	63.6%	18.2%	18.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Support your child with their learning at home	54.5%	36.4%	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%
Create a clear and consistent homework routine	45.5%	27.3%	27.3%	0.0%	0.0%
Ensure your child attends school	81.8%	9.1%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%

Participate in school activities and events	45.5%	27.3%	27.3%	0.0%	0.0%
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The majority of respondents expressed strong confidence in supporting their child's learning in various areas. Specifically, 82% felt very confident ensuring their child attends school, while 64% were very confident in speaking with staff about their child's learning. Over half (55%) felt very confident supporting learning at home, though 9% reported being not very confident in this area. Creating a clear and consistent homework routine and participating in school activities had lower "very confident" responses at 46%, with just over one quarter (27.3%) feeling neutral (neither confident nor unconfident) in these areas. Overall, confidence levels are generally high, with very few respondents expressing low confidence.

Table 9: Parent Knowledge

% of parents

	Good knowledge	Reasonable knowledge	Basic knowledge	Limited knowledge	No knowledge
The academic year, including testing/examination schedules	36.4%	45.5%	9.1%	9.1%	0.0%
School extracurricular activities/clubs/enrichment opportunities	45.5%	36.4%	9.1%	9.1%	0.0%
The transition between schools	45.5%	45.5%	0.0%	0.0%	9.1%
The transition from one year group to another	54.5%	36.4%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%

Parents generally reported strong knowledge in relation to various school-related areas. Over half (55%) indicated they had good or reasonable knowledge of the academic year and testing schedules, with only a small portion (9%) expressing limited knowledge. Knowledge of extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities was similarly high, with 82% reporting good or reasonable knowledge. The transition between schools saw even stronger confidence, as 91% of parents felt they had good or reasonable knowledge, though 9% reported no knowledge. Lastly, knowledge about transitions from one year group to another was the highest, with 91% of parents indicating good or reasonable knowledge.

Table 10: Parent Confidence in SEND Needs Support

% of parents

	Very confident	Fairly confident	Neither	Not very confident	Not at all confident
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Child's SEND needs supported	45.5%	18.2%	18.2%	9.1%	9.1%
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The majority of parents feel confident in the support their child's SEND needs receive, with 45.5% expressing they are very confident and another 18% fairly confident. This reflects a strong overall trust in the support systems in place. While a small number of parents are neutral or less confident, overall parents are confident with the efforts made to meet their child's needs.

5.9 Parent Evaluation Qualitative Findings

In response to the question 'what, if anything, does the school do well in relation to your child's experiences of being in school', responses were coded as staff support and professionalism, and student experience and wellbeing, as follows:

Staff Support and Professionalism

All staff at City Academy go an extra mile in supporting our / my child (children). Their professionalism and the passion about what they do is the reason my son is always cheerful going to school, we have never woken him up.

I cannot speak enough about the staff; I am so proud they're my son's second family.

The staff at City Academy Hackney have been exceptionally helpful and supportive during my child's anxiety around school (and other social situations). They provided him a peer mentor, an opportunity to do art therapy, a trusted teacher to speak to, and a lot of care and understanding.

They encourage him to be in school, have put in place a system so he can use his planner to show issues with sound, allowed him to wear Loop earbuds, and been overall pretty amazing, especially as he doesn't have an EHCP. (We are in the early stages of figuring out any neurodiversity he may have).

Five parents praised the staff for their exceptional dedication, professionalism, and genuine care. They highlighted how the supportive environment contributes to their children's happiness and enthusiasm to attend school. Staff go beyond expectations by providing tailored support, such as peer mentoring, art therapy, and trusted relationships, especially for children experiencing anxiety or neurodiverse needs—even without formal EHCP plans. This compassionate and proactive approach fosters a strong sense of community and reassurance among families.

Student Experience and Wellbeing

He says nice stuff about his teachers.

My child really enjoys coming to school to city Academy in Hackney. My child is encouraged to do well and supported in his class.

I feel that they have developed a good understanding of who he is as a person, not just his academic challenges. They are kind and nurturing and that helps him feel safe and build trust.

My child's experience at school has been excellent.

He is well looked after.

I think my child feels supported and safe. He knows who to speak to and how to reach for help if there are any issues.

They expect the best of him, even when he is finding it hard to give it.

Six parents express a strong sense of satisfaction with their child's experience at The City Academy, Hackney. Children enjoy attending school and feel encouraged and supported academically. Staff are recognized for their kindness and nurturing approach, creating a safe environment where students feel understood as individuals. This supportive atmosphere helps build trust and ensures that children know where to turn if they need help, contributing to an overall excellent school experience.

Finally, in response to the question 'what, if anything, could the school do to improve your child's experiences of being in school, parent responses were coded in four areas: SEND support, teaching strategies, homework and communication:

SEND Support and Understanding

I very much feel my child's SEND is not recognised like some other children, I feel even with diagnosis they pick and choose who is SEND. I feel my son gets minimal support and understanding. Feel they see what they want when they want. Feel my child is blamed in every situation. I could go on, but I won't.

Be more understanding of differences that means SEND children find it difficult to follow some of the very rigid rules of the school and when they fail, they are not naughty children, and it won't be treated as a behavioural issue but seen with compassion and understanding.

I would like more support for SEND provision, like more resources, and TA support also more incentives and rewards, for pupils that work extremely hard like my son with trips and outstanding recognition with certificates etc. also better communication with the staff and the parents would be nice.

I think maybe broader than this, that the lives and experiences of children with SEND and/or neurodiversity need to be better understood by all students so that these children are not othered, undervalued, misunderstood. The more that all students are encouraged to understand, empathise and support kids with SEND and/or neurodiversity, the easier it is for people like my son, and the future would be more hopeful and kinder. If the school could support that kind of learning, that would be great.

One on one meeting with SEND allocated teacher with parents and student.

Teaching Strategies / Classroom Practice

I think intervention in science class in small groups would help and benefit my child. Also extra tutoring support for my child in English, maths, science would help him in GCSE to get the pass grade. Also more visual support and cues in the classroom would help him understand and learn better. My son is a visual learner.

Homework

Make better homework tasks. At the moment it's really boring for my child.

Homework would be far better if it were not rote copying from a KO, but more teacher-guided, pupil-led research/report.

Parent-School Communication

Not wait until mid year to meet with parents at parents evening, but to have a meeting with core subjects (Math, English, Science) at the start of the year.

Five parents expressed concerns that their children's SEND () are not always fully recognized or supported, even when formal diagnoses are in place. There is a call for greater understanding and compassion around the challenges SEND students face, especially regarding school rules and behaviour expectations. Parents would like to see more resources, targeted support from teaching assistants, and incentives such as trips or certificates to recognize hard work. Improved communication between staff and families is also a priority, alongside fostering a school culture where all students better understand and empathize with peers who have SEND or neurodiverse needs, helping reduce feelings of exclusion.

In terms of teaching strategies and classroom practice, parents advocate for more small-group interventions, especially in core subjects like science, English, and maths, to support their children's success, particularly for those preparing for GCSEs. They emphasize the need for more visual learning aids, as some students respond better to visual cues. Homework assignments could be diversified to ensure a broader diet of tasks. One parent sought more proactive communication, recommending earlier meetings with teachers at the start of the school year for core subjects instead of waiting until mid-year parent evenings.

Indicative case studies

Three parents were willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. The interview content was based on the main thematic elements of the survey, comprising three key dimensions: i. Parents' experiences of SEND provision and support. ii. Curriculum and learning support. iii. Future expectations.

Parents provided strong reinforcing evidence that the positive responses derived from the parent survey were amplified in these individual cases. In each instance parents spoke warmly about the relationship that their child had made with certain key teaching staff, with one noting that a teacher *'...was really helpful and very responsive and would always call us and check in... he went like above and beyond in keeping in touch. And then there was his DT, teacher, and his maths teacher...he just felt very comfortable with them all in being himself with them in terms of the strategies they employed'*.

These interviewees also noted the extent to which SEND students had been supported by adaptive teaching and learning approaches, which went a long way to promoting greater resilience amongst learners to stress and broader mental health concerns, especially in creating an appropriate climate for learning. Again, parent commentaries provided amplification of the quantitative data derived from the survey. For instance, it was noted that the teaching staff, including TAs, were *'...really excellent because they do take into consideration all of those factors which affect him. I've always been quite impressed whenever I've had an annual review about how accurate they are about [student name] in terms of my understanding of [student's name] as well at home. So, they have a really good sense of who he is and how he's forming. They're very good'*.

One valuable aspect of the parent interviews has been that they have allowed for granularity and nuance, the resulting detail highlighting several areas which could be taken forward as action points for future development. Four of these have been identified in the narrative data:

1. Promoting a greater range of strategies to help insulate SEND students from the negative impact of formal exams and an emphasis on 'academic achievement'.
2. The establishment of more accessible 'safe spaces' for SEND students during social times (break/lunchtimes) including promoting clubs or formal recreational activity during these times
3. Further emphasis on developing skills, understanding and strategies to assist SEND students in building confidence and their wider social development
4. Reviewing the ways that communication between school and home is maintained, with consistency relating to a 'lead contact person' in cases where the needs of a SEND student are complex and/or co-morbid.

6. Recommendations

Based on the survey and interview data, this evaluation confirms that the arrangements for SEND in the City Academy are clearly aligned to existing national guidelines for effective practice. The findings highlight that the whole school community should continue to be energised in its commitment to the following:

1. Raising the profile of SEND First to the student and parent community.
2. Maintaining a positive and supportive environment for all students.
3. Building an ongoing, holistic understanding of students and their individual needs.
4. Ensuring all students have access to high-quality teaching.
5. Complementing high-quality teaching with carefully selected small-group and one-to-one interventions.
6. Working effectively with teaching assistants.
7. Using monitoring and tracking systems effectively to maintain reliable data that informs interventions.
8. Promoting professional development so that all staff have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to implement inclusive and adaptive teaching.
9. Ensuring strong senior leadership commitment to inclusion and SEND as a strategic priority.

The evidence indicates that the school is actively progressing in each of these areas. The overarching recommendation is to maintain a clear focus on inclusive SEND practices, with the aim of both sustaining and enhancing current efforts. What emerged most strongly from the data was the overwhelmingly positive way in which students, teachers, and parents view their overall SEND experience.

7. Conclusions

Although the UK has taken critical precautions to establish a more inclusive SEND policy, it is still a primary challenge to deliver it equally across all regions. Thus, the objectives outlined in the Children and Families Act and the 2022 SEND Review necessitate significant attention and investment in staff, training, and collaboration among education, health, and social care services (Department for Education, 2015; Department for Education, 2022).

Establishing clear and consistent assessment processes, enhancing early intervention strategies, and promoting inclusive values throughout the entire school system are essential for long-term improvement (Department for Education, 2022; Council for Disabled Children, 2023).

The SEND First approach, developed by The City Academy, Hackney, is a strong example of how national goals can be turned into successful local action. The Academy puts SEND students at the heart of its work, provides regular training for all staff, and encourages all teachers to take shared responsibility for inclusion. This approach is backed by research from Cordingley et al. (2015) and Boyle et al. (2022), which underlines the value of school-wide professional learning communities in enhancing inclusive practice.

The findings confirm generally positive views from students, with many indicating a good understanding of SEND support and confidence in communicating with teachers, parents, and participating in school activities. However, students were not very confident about two things: finishing their homework and communicating with behaviour mentors. Students have varying levels of awareness regarding extracurricular activities and the transitions between year groups, as some are only familiar with the basics. This indicates that although they feel supported in their main studies, more focus is needed on informing them about enrichment opportunities and helping them build independent learning skills.

The data indicates a strong understanding of the SEND approach, with over two-thirds of staff strongly agreeing that they comprehend how provision and daily support are delivered. School relationships were seen positively, with staff highlighting diversity and celebrating achievements. However, there were some weaker areas. For example, staff reported having less knowledge about extracurricular support and about how students move between year groups or from primary to secondary school. This highlights the need for continuous training and improved communication among staff.

The data show that parents generally feel confident in supporting their children's education. For instance, more than 70% reported being very confident about ensuring their children's attendance. Additionally, most parents expressed confidence in engaging with school staff and supporting their children's learning at home. Many parents reported having only a limited or basic understanding of school testing schedules and extracurricular activities. While parents are engaged and motivated, clearer communication from schools about procedures and enrichment options would help increase their involvement.

In sum, the evaluation findings are positive and confirm that by including SEND in everyday teaching rather than treating it as something separate, The City Academy shows how clear routines, guided by policy and supported by strong leadership, are positively experienced by students, staff and parents.

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