

# THE PERFECT SENCO

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I dedicate this book to my partner, Frank, for his patience during my many hours of writing.



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## Foreword

A school is only as good as the progress of its most vulnerable, challenging child. This has never been more true than now, as Ofsted has increased the pressure on schools to ensure they are meeting the needs of all pupils, especially those with learning challenges. However, funding levels have been cut, so the number of pupils meeting the criteria to attract extra resources and one-to-one support continues to spiral downwards.

Allied to this, the credibility of teaching assistants – the traditional support for needy pupils – is being questioned as research emerges which challenges their effectiveness in helping them to become better learners. The use that schools make of the Pupil Premium to support underprivileged children is also being ruthlessly scrutinised. If interventions to help needy pupils are not delivering results, we can now expect big questions to be asked of the school leadership.

The school special educational needs coordinator (SENCO), who drives the policy and practice that leads to successful outcomes for these special children, has become pivotal to the success of every school. This leadership role, rooted in ensuring that everyday classroom practice caters for

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vulnerable learners, provides a tough challenge. The work that SENCOs do can only be effective if it is entrenched in the values and vision of a school leadership which puts learning at the heart of its mission, and the SENCO at the heart of its leadership team.

What Natalie Packer has managed to do brilliantly in this book is to provide that vision and framework to help every practising SENCO, or would-be SENCO, understand how to do the very best job for vulnerable children so that they can make progress and close the gap. Closing that gap – between the children who succeed at school and those who, for whatever reason, struggle to achieve – is the key role of the SENCO and their team. However, this won't be done solely by providing one-to-one support, or nurture groups, or even a team of enthusiastic, retrained teaching assistants. The only way to really help these children to make outstanding progress is through the high expectations of every teacher in every classroom, every hour of every day for 38 weeks of the year. These children may not be getting the type of emotional support that creates resilient learners at home, so school could be the only chance they have.

A SENCO is thus central to the whole-school drive to realise consistently high quality teaching. This includes tracking and engaging pupils so that they can achieve their full potential. At the heart of high quality outcomes for all children is a culture of high expectations and the belief that there is a way to help every child achieve more. The SENCO who can drive up expectations and commitment in every lesson and who,

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therefore, delivers results for the most challenging children, will be much in demand. This book is invaluable because it is full of useful advice and practical strategies that will be used again and again to deliver that vision of outstanding progress for vulnerable children in every classroom.

This book is so good that it should be read not only by SENCOs but by every member of the leadership team, governors and every middle leader. Why? Because in order to deliver for *all* pupils, *all* teachers and leaders need to understand how to find ways to help children with special educational needs to make breakthroughs in learning, gain confidence and achieve the very best results they can.

In uncertain times, with expectations high, one thing is certain – a school is only as good as its SENCO.

Jackie Beere, Tiffield



## List of abbreviations

AfL	Assessment for Learning
APS	average points score
ASD	autistic spectrum disorder
ASDAN	Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network
CAF	Common Assessment Framework
CAT	Cognitive Abilities Test
CPD	continuing professional development
CUREE	Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DISS	Deployment and Impact of Support Staff
EAL	English as an additional language
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EHC	Education, Health and Care (plan)
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission

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FE	further education
FFT	Fischer Family Trust
ICT	information and communication technology
IDP	Inclusion Development Programme
IEP	individual education plan
NASENCO	National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordinators
NQT	newly qualified teacher
PCP	person-centred planning
PSHE	personal, social and health education
QTS	qualified teacher status
RAISE	Reporting and Analysis for Improvement through School Self-Evaluation
SEAL	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning
SEMH	social, emotional and mental health
SEN	special educational needs
SENCO	special educational needs coordinator
SEND	special educational needs and disability
SLT	senior leadership team
TA	teaching assistant
TAC	team around the child

# Introduction

Wanted: Special Educational Needs Coordinator  
(SENCO)

Must be efficient, organised, enthusiastic and flexible.

Must be highly skilled in assessing and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable pupils.

Must be able to motivate and support staff to ensure all pupils make exceptional progress – all day, every day!

Have you ever wondered what it means to be the ‘perfect’ special educational needs coordinator (SENCO)? For those of you who have been a SENCO for a number of years, in the early days it is likely that your role consisted mainly of working with small groups of pupils and writing mountains of targets. Over recent years, however, the job of the SENCO has become more strategic and will now include provision mapping, working in partnership with parents, supporting other colleagues, commissioning services, demonstrating pupil progress and ensuring value for money. In essence, it is a role which contributes significantly to whole-school improvement.

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It has never been easy to give a clear definition that encompasses the vast nature of the SENCO job and, to some extent, it is open to interpretation by the head teacher and governors of individual schools. However, the importance of the role is clear: the SENCO is currently only one of two statutory school roles (the other, of course, is the head teacher). But only one of these roles requires someone with qualified teacher status (QTS) – and it's not the head!

This requirement for all schools to have a qualified SENCO, in addition to the introduction of the National Award for SENCOs (NASENCO), has helped to raise the status of the role significantly. Along with raised status, however, comes increased responsibility and accountability, not forgetting to mention the challenges of a new national special educational needs (SEN) system. High quality professional development, support and accurate information are essential if the SENCO is to fulfil their role efficiently and effectively.

It could be argued that, ultimately, the purpose of the SENCO is to do themselves out of a job. Why? Because a key priority must be to ensure that all teachers are fulfilling their responsibilities towards pupils with SEN. Providing support for colleagues in school through training, coaching, mentoring or joint planning will enable all staff to become more confident in their own classroom practice. However, although the new *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice*<sup>1</sup> acknowledges that *every* teacher is a teacher of

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1 DfE (2014b), *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years*. Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/338195/Code\\_of\\_Practice\\_approved\\_by\\_Parliament\\_290714.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/338195/Code_of_Practice_approved_by_Parliament_290714.pdf)



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children with special educational needs, the SENCO is there not only to act as an advocate for these children, but because they are instrumental in developing the whole-school processes and practice upon which inclusive teaching and learning can be built.

The aim of this book is to support those professionals in school who have overall responsibility for ensuring high quality provision for, and progress of, pupils with SEN. Its purpose is to provide guidance for SENCOs on working in a strategic way to support improvement. It will be of use not only for potential or newly appointed SENCOs, but also for those who are more experienced and wish to keep their day-to-day practice up to date.

The book can be used in a number of ways:

- As a point of reference for busy SENCOs.
- For SENCOs to use as part of their own professional development.
- To encourage reflection of current policy and practice.
- To support cultural and systemic change in school.

This book has been published at a time when there is significant change occurring within the world of special educational needs. The implications of the Children and Families Act and the *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice* is resulting in many challenges for schools, parents and the wide range of services dedicated to improving the life chances of some of our most vulnerable

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youngsters. September 2012 brought with it the introduction of yet another Ofsted framework,<sup>2</sup> which has an increased focus on judging how well schools provide for pupils with SEN and for those with disabilities. Along with other changes, including the focus on disadvantage through the Pupil Premium, the 2012 *Teachers' Standards*<sup>3</sup> and a revised curriculum in 2014, there is much for school leaders to consider.

However, these changes are also bringing about new opportunities and some schools are looking, for example, to redefine the role of the SENCO. Many are now taking a fully inclusive approach and incorporating responsibility for other vulnerable groups, including looked after children or those eligible for free school meals. No matter which way leaders choose to define the role in their school, ultimately they need to ensure that pupils with SEN receive the highest quality provision and make excellent progress. Getting the role right is not just about ticking boxes for Ofsted or ensuring we are following the latest government message; we do it because we want to make a difference to the lives of children. This may sound clichéd but, in my experience, I have found that SENCOs are some of the most passionate and dedicated staff in our schools and genuinely strive to do the best for their pupils. *The Perfect SENCO* aims to support those professionals to make that difference.

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2 Ofsted (2013), *The Framework for School Inspection 2012*. Ref: 120100.  
Available at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/framework-for-school-inspection>

3 DfE (2012), *Teachers' Standards*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/teachers%20standards.pdf>

## Chapter 1

# The SENCO: centre stage for school improvement

'We want to put in place a radically different system to support better life outcomes for young people; give parents confidence by giving them more control; and transfer power to professionals on the front line and to local communities.'<sup>1</sup>

How many new policies, ideas and initiatives have you experienced since you became a teacher or leader? Probably quite a few! No doubt a number of you will currently be witnessing the most significant national change in SEN since you became a SENCO (more on this below). Keeping up to date with the latest legislation and guidance is now more important than ever to ensure you can respond to the changes and

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<sup>1</sup> DfE (2011) *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability. A Consultation*. Available at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130401151715/https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/CM%208027>, p. 4.

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make a successful transition from one system to another. In 2011, the government launched their SEN Green Paper, *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability. A Consultation*. The paper outlined their vision for improving the SEN system so that it works better for young people with special educational needs and their families. The aim is to achieve this through a focus on involving children, parents and young people in decision making more and providing greater choice and control for young people and parents over their support.

In 2012, the government published its response to the consultation on the Green Paper in *Progress and Next Steps*.<sup>2</sup> The Children and Families Act<sup>3</sup> followed in March 2014 to take forward the legislative proposals. Here is a brief summary of the key points relating to the relevant aspects of the legislation (Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014) and its associated regulations:

- Local authorities to have regard to the views and wishes of children and young people and their families when making decisions about special educational needs, and involve them in the decision-making process.

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2 DfE (2012), *Support and Aspiration: A New Approach to Special Educational Needs and Disability. Progress and Next Steps*. Available at: <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/support%20and%20aspiration%20a%20new%20approach%20to%20special%20educational%20needs%20and%20disability%20%20%20progress%20and%20next%20steps.pdf>

3 House of Commons (2014), *Children and Families Act*. London: HMSO. Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted>

## Chapter 1

- Local authorities, health and social care to jointly commission services for children and young people with SEN and their families.
- Local authorities to produce a 'local offer' of services available for supporting children with SEN and their families.
- Statements replaced with a combined Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan which will run from birth to 25 years and focus on long-term outcomes.
- Parents directly involved in the EHC plan assessment process and given the choice of more control of funding for support of their child's needs through a personal budget.
- School Action and School Action Plus replaced with a single, school-based category known as 'SEN support'. Improved teacher training and professional development to include more focus on supporting pupils with SEN.
- Provision of improved access to quality post-16 vocational and work-related learning options for young people with SEN.
- A statutory duty placed on schools and other relevant organisations to publish SEN information on their website as a requirement of the new SEN and disability regulations.
- A new *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice* introduced (see below).

## *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years*

The *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years*<sup>4</sup> came into force in September 2014. The Code provides statutory guidance and advice on how to carry out statutory duties to identify, assess and make provision for children and young people's SEN as set out in Part 3 of the Children and Families Act 2014 (and associated regulations). The Code also sets out how legislation and regulations concerning children and young people with disabilities works alongside this. Schools (including academies and free schools), further education (FE) colleges, sixth form colleges and early years providers must all have regard to the Code, as must a number of other organisations, including local authorities and NHS trusts (a full list is available in the Code of Practice). This means that, whenever relevant organisations are taking decisions regarding children and young people with SEN, they must give consideration to what the Code says.

The contents of the Code of Practice include statutory guidance and advice on the following:

- Overarching principles underpinning the legislation and guidance.
- Impartial information, advice and support that must be provided by local authorities.

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4 DfE (2014b), *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years*.

- How education, health and care should be working together, including development of the local offer.
- Actions for early years providers, schools and further education providers to ensure they meet their duties towards children and young people with SEN.
- Support to prepare children and young people for adulthood.
- Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans.
- Managing children and young people in specific circumstances (e.g. looked after children).
- Resolving disagreements.

There is indeed a significant amount of information within the Code of Practice and, for a new SENCO, one of their first jobs should be to identify and read the priority chapters!

## Definition of special educational needs

The overall definition of what constitutes a special educational need is stated within the Code (and has not changed since the previous 2001 Code of Practice):

*A child or young person has SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her.*

*A child of compulsory school age or a young person has a learning difficulty or disability if he or she:*

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- *has a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or*
- *has a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions.*<sup>5</sup>

The definition is a helpful starting point for SENCOs to share with other members of staff and to consider, within their own school population, who may potentially require additional support.

### Key principles

The Code is based upon a number of key principles:

- The participation of children, parents and young people in decision making.
- The early identification of children and young people's needs.
- Greater choice and control for young people and parents over their support.
- Collaboration between education, health and social care services.
- High quality provision to meet the needs of children and young people with SEN.
- A focus on inclusive practice and removing barriers to learning.

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5 DfE (2014b), *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice: 0 to 25 Years*, pp. 15-16.



# THE PERFECT SENCO

is the fully up-to-date, essential guide to supporting children with special educational needs.

Covering the changes resulting from the new *Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice*, this book will empower your school to embrace the national changes which came into force in September 2014.

Real education isn't about a race to the top of the class or the league table. It isn't about being better than anyone else or accumulating as many qualifications as you possibly can. It's about being helped to be the best you can possibly be by professionals who are skilled enough to know how to do it and compassionate enough to take the time to do it well. Nowhere is this philosophy more important than when it comes to supporting children with special educational needs, and this book – written for our Perfect series by a SEN consultant with many years' experience – will help you apply it to these children.

*“The Perfect SENCO offers all of us in education, not just SENCOs, a fantastic, highly readable guide that ensures that the needs of our most vulnerable pupils and students are fundamental to every school's philosophy, strategy, planning and practice. Most importantly, the book provides clear routes that determine effective outcomes for children and young people.”*

Jane Friswell, SEND consultant, CEO,  
nasen (National Association of Special Educational Needs)

*“Gives a clear insight into how to develop an educational philosophy whilst enabling opportunities for any teacher to be confident in becoming the perfect SENCO.”*

Chris Wheatley, Executive Head,  
The Cotgrave Candleby Lane School, CEO, Flying High Trust

**Natalie Packer** is an education consultant who specialises in SEN and school improvement. Having previously been a teacher, SENCO and head teacher, and having worked with local authorities and alongside the Department for Education, Natalie has a significant amount of experience in the education sector. She runs professional development courses across the country and is a consultant for a range of national and international educational organisations.

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