

# **Missing Voices**

Version 1

**The Multi-Schools  
Council (Essex)  
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## Introduction

The Multi-Schools Council's aim is to promote positive perceptions towards young people with SEND or mental health challenges. A large majority of our time is spent in schools listening to young people who help decide on our strategic aims moving forwards.

School attendance is something that has been raised as a priority to us over the last four years resulting in our initial report back in 2022 <https://www.multischoolscouncil.org.uk/attendance-report/> . However, we found that a growing number of young people were starting to access education away from the 'traditional school model' and their voices are just as important.

In 2025 we made the decision to start visiting various alternative provisions to engage with young people. The views and provisions in this report have been kept anonymous but have included pupil referral units, therapy farms, car garages, youth centres and those learning from home just to mention a few.

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#### Part 1 - Why mainstream provision hasn't worked for some young people

We start our report by reflecting on the views shared from young people about the challenges they faced within mainstream education. We felt it was important to consider why some young people are accessing alternative provisions while considering that each young person we spoke with has their own individual story. Although most young people we spoke with gave us views on negative experiences we also have some positive experiences to reflect on within this report too.

What was highlighted to us right from the start by several young people across different settings was how they felt there was a **lack of understanding from staff** within schools around specific needs. These specific needs varied from SEND to mental health challenges but also generally just understanding them as a human being. Young people felt that what made this so challenging for staff was the **high volume** of young people pushed into classrooms and corridors, particularly in secondary schools, which made it increasingly difficult for staff to fully understand individual needs.

The high volume or numbers of young people in schools was the number one reason given to us by young people we spoke with about why they felt they were unable to access mainstream education. Another contributing factor was the **social pressure** applied by their peers within school to act a certain way and when this did not happen, we heard some shocking examples of **bullying** within schools. Bullying was also another key contributor to why young people felt they couldn't access mainstream education and some we spoke to expressed a real frustration that incidents had not been dealt with early enough meaning they 'snowballed' and became so big that attendance was just then unmanageable.

What also became apparent early on was how young people felt mainstream education was too **competitive or intense** and this was very negative for some. There were strong views about how **exam pressure** was very intense, especially within secondary schools and that more value was placed on 'getting the right results' rather than developing a young person for the future.

## **‘Some schools can destroy our natural motivation because it becomes all about results’. Girl, 15**

**Motivation** was a hot topic within these settings too which will be covered further in the report. When it came to mainstream settings some believed that personal motivation was not supported or developed enough but in fact harmed by some school's approaches to learning. When it becomes more about results young people felt that their **wellbeing needs** were at times then dismissed which young people put down to adults feeling as if they were too busy or rushed to reach results. They also felt that the **reputation** of the school was often more important and that again this linked to exam results. We found that many young people were actually sympathetic towards staff in schools as they felt like they were under too much pressure.

## **‘A lot of us actually do just want to learn but it's the things they have in place that stop us’. Boy, 13**

The long-lasting impact of **Covid** was also sighted by individuals we spoke with, some giving some horrific accounts of the impact on family members or themselves and they felt at times this had not been acknowledged enough within education. For some up until this point they were able to access school but the knock effect was just too great and they hoped this didn't stigmatise them moving forwards. On the theme of isolation from within Covid times, many young people we spoke with were very clear that **isolation units** as a response to behaviour concerns just don't work. Again, we heard some very negative examples of how times within these units had completely broken any relationship they felt they had with the school and they never wanted to return.

We did speak with some primary children as part of this report however 75% were of secondary age. What we found was that at times **communication between secondary and primary** schools was poor, meaning certain needs or adjustments were not being put in place. For some going from a small primary setting to a much bigger secondary was a massive jump, however they felt that if there was more continuity between the two, they could have remained within secondary school. Young people also felt that **approaches and expectations** were so different between a Primary/Secondary setting that adjusting was just too difficult. While some young people appreciated that there needs to be a 'step up' in terms of going to secondary school they made the point that everyone develops at a different rate and that this needs to be considered.

**Reputation** is something we have already highlighted above however it came up again in terms of young people's own reputations. We spoke with some young people who had been excluded or moved to different settings and while at the time it was explained as a 'fresh start' some of them received negative comments from staff or at least felt as if they were being judged on their previous mistakes. Young people felt like this type of experience created a vicious cycle which left them feeling like 'what's the point in trying'.

## **‘Staff can sometimes judge you on your past and I don't think that's fair. Adults make mistakes too.’ Girl, 12**

Sadly, we spoke with one young girl who said *‘Some schools didn't think I was worth their time’*. This young person was preparing to leave education, she had been involved with drugs at a young age and whilst she accepted that at the time consequences and rehabilitation was needed, even after she proved herself, some still saw her as too much of a **'risk'**. This was then reflected in other views across the different settings we visited.

Another common theme was the lack of support after returning from the **six-week holiday's**. There were several examples where placements had broken down because on returning, in their view, not enough was done to acknowledge the change in return or understand any experiences over the summer period that could have impacted them. Within this many young people criticised the **format** of a traditional school day, citing that day's were too long or lessons where not staggered with enough breaks. Understanding the different attention spans of young people they felt was key, particularly for those young people with SEND.

Some young people we spoke with said they had switched off from education in their previous setting because of a lack of **post-16 offer**. What some young people found difficult, especially towards the later years of education, was understanding where the learning was driving them towards. This could be linked back to young people's motivation, but it was also about clarity and re-assurance beyond their schools years rather than pinning everything on exams. Some of the younger children we spoke with also felt that at times primary schools didn't **prepare** you enough for the future and that having a clear pathway was just as important in the early years as it is when you reach secondary school.

Our findings were split evenly between speaking with boys & girls within these various settings but what girls highlighted to us the most was **peer pressure**. We covered bullying above which was a hot topic across both genders however girls highlighted peer pressure in particular as being a key reason on why mainstream education was inaccessible. Many we spoke with used the word 'traumatised' because of issues not being dealt with early on and when there was no early interventions or support with peer pressure the relationship with school broke down. A lot of young girls we spoke with said that in school they were often classed as 'the quiet ones' but their point was to not miss the **quiet ones** because they can be struggling just as much as those that outwardly express it.

## **'It can be so lonely in school when you don't fit into a certain criteria'. Girl, 15**

### Part 2 - What works in alterative provisions

As part of our conversations with young people we also took some time to focus on the here and now, what their current provisions were offering them. What clearly stood out right from the start was their ability to be **flexible**. Flexibility took many different forms from our conversations but covered things such as start/finish times, adaptations to lesson plans and expectations. Particularly popular was the ability to offer different start, break and finish times based on individual circumstances, as well as responding to different needs in the moment at the point when it was most needed.

Many young people said that on joining an alternative provision they also the opportunity to work with **other services**. Interestingly, across the different provisions, the *Wilderness foundation* was mentioned on several occasions as having a positive impact on young people. Young people spoke about how being able to access services like this was positive whereas in the past they were unable to. Within the different provisions we visited, **therapy animals** were also a common site, and young people spoke about the calm, reassurance and safety that they could often offer to individuals.

**Individual learning opportunities** was also a big hit within most of the provisions we visited. Some of the young people felt they were engaging much better with education because they were offered that more personal support. Within those individual learning spaces, a big theme of our conversations centred around the fact young people felt they could **trust** the adults. Staff approaches were crucial to ensuring young people felt the provision was for them and they spoke about staff 'looking like they wanted to be there' and 'staff actually getting on with each other' both aspects they felt were important in creating the correct environment.

## **'They actually care here. I know that because they tell me and they show me'. Boy, 9**

The **approaches to learning** were also highlighted as a strength across different alterative provisions. For example, having the opportunity to type rather than write or the ability to be more practical in the way they learnt felt more in-line with how young people believed they would be able to make progress.

Linked to this was how the provisions adapted learning to your **interests**. Motivation is something we spoke about during part 1 but across these provisions young people showed a real appetite to learn because they felt it was clearly linked to the aspirations they had.

**‘AP’s only work really if you have the right mindset yourself. Staff help that because they talk on your level and show their own emotions.’ Boy, 15**

**Wellbeing spaces** were another key feature across the provisions visited and many young people spoke about having these areas clearly defined enabled them to access their education. In addition, many felt this was something that previously had not been available or was restricted at certain times and as one young girl was telling us ‘*You can’t decide when you start to feel unwell, so it doesn’t make sense to have spaces that can only be used at certain times, you might as well not have the spaces at all.*’ What young people said works is that time was given to focus on your wellbeing, it didn’t feel rushed, and that staff understood you needed to be in the right place to learn.

In some of the provisions young people we spoke with accessed this provision as part of an enriched education offer and still attended their mainstream provisions at different points. These groups of young people spoke about how the alternative provision **gave them a break** from what was a busy or competitive environment and because they got his opportunity their attendance had improved. Many of the young people said they wanted the alternative provision to work, and it was working because it would look **better on their record**. There was certainly a common theme here both in part 1 and 2 about how young people wanted to be perceived, how they got that reassurance in an alternative provision but how they wanted this to be looked upon positively rather than negatively.

**‘We aren’t here because we are *naughty kids* and I think that’s really important for others to understand’. Girl, 14**

The final aspect covered on our visit’s links to a sense of belonging, but young people felt this was achieved because they were around other **young people just ‘like them’**. In the alternative provisions young people understood that those attending all had their own reasons or stories and this filled them with comfort, reassurance and confidence that they were not alone.

Part 3 - Considerations for the future

To finish our report, we want to focus on how learning from this first report could be used within the system to consider how adaptations could be made within mainstream schools. While considerations below build on views shared in parts 1 and 2 we also appreciate there are some limitations to what can be achieved within the current system.

- **Improve staff understanding** - While not all young people within our report had an identified special educational need, a high volume did. Improving the SEND content within teacher training was a popular suggestion among young people as well as ensuring there is regular CPD throughout the academic year.
- **Improve staff understanding (2)** - Away from specifically focusing on young people with SEND young people felt adults, particularly in secondary schools, needed to be given more time to focus on understanding an individual. Young people felt this could be reflected in protected time or increased capacity in teams such as pastoral or wellbeing roles. A common saying was that ‘*there are a lot of deeper issues going on for young people that staff don’t always have the time to see*’. How are mental health leads in schools being monitored to see if these roles are making a difference?

- **High volume** - A consideration highlighted that we don't have the answer too but very high on reasons why mainstream education became overwhelming was the numbers of young people in the classroom or around specific areas of the school. School extensions? Caps on classrooms numbers? Explore how initial spaces could be used better? All of which, as young people stated, could need a lot of investment.
- **Bullying or social pressures, still an issue** - Within our wider work we know approaches to anti-bullying are still needed both from a in-person and digital perspective. Interestingly there was a strong feeling amongst girls that this was a growing issue, particularly for those with autism or other neurological differences. Are there enough interventions in this space?
- **What's the priority in schools?** - Do we just want to produce results or well-rounded individuals? Reputationally for schools what matters the most? There were lots of questions and comments linked to this area for young people in AP's. There was certainly a trend in how the pressure from primary to secondary school shifted dramatically and for some this was just too much. While some young people we spoke with accepted that a level of pressure could be helpful for adult life, others believed the over emphasis on exams was just unhelpful, de-motivating and in some cases negatively impacted young people's wellbeing.
- **Medical needs being misunderstood** - The fall out from Covid-19 was still felt by some of the age groups we spoke with. For a long period, the pandemic put health needs in the spotlight, but this has also impacted young people's mindsets around health moving forwards. While their feels to be intense pressure within the education system understanding the longer lasting impact of Covid-19 some young people felt was missed at times. Could better understanding around personal health for everyone reduce the number of young people reliant on some services?
- **Isolation units don't work** - A common dominator, even in our previous school attendance report. We were unable to find any young people within AP's who felt these types of units had a positive impact on their mainstream school experience or provided a learning opportunity. A response at times to this has been well if they don't work, then what instead? A suggestion could be to highlight what other approaches could be seen as more impactful? *'When I was isolated in my old school this just made me feel even more alone in the system, like I didn't belong here.'*
- **The transition between primary and secondary school** - An area to continue focusing on. It makes complete sense what young people were telling us as the two environments can be so different. The communication around specific needs and support needed as part of the transition they felt could be better. However, the main concern was about preparation, this in many cases in young people's eyes was that it started too late, that issues were sometimes only getting picked up after they were in a secondary school placement. Are we proactive enough in this space? Could we better use technology to support the communication between settings?
- **Structure** - A couple of points raised that seemed to have an impact on young people's ability to access mainstream education. The first was how a typical school day might be structured and the impact of this particularly on those with specific needs. Secondly, how school holidays were structured, particularly the summertime where it was felt the transition after such a long period away impacted their ability to come back successfully. Possibly some radical thinking needed here based on their feedback: Shorter school days? Adapting school days? More breaks? A flexi-day, 4-days in, one extra day off, hybrid approaches? Changing the holiday break format? Possibly a lot to consider.
- **Motivation to learn** - The primary reason APs seemed popular among both genders was their ability to motivate learners. As learning was more tailored young people didn't even class it as 'learning' but with the current structures in place is that at all possible to replicate in some way in mainstream settings? One young person did tell us that he felt no matter where you are educated motivation is a self-driven force, but are we focusing on supporting this enough?
- **What's the end goal?** - In a similar vein to the above some AP's were more appealing as young people could make a realistic link to what they were learning and where they wanted to get to following education. At times young people felt that within mainstream this could get lost and would come back to exams. A couple of thoughts here include continuing to develop an all-age approach to preparing for adulthood & developing more ways to assess individual's capabilities. Are we over reliant on exams?
- **Belonging (the new buzz word but it should not be undervalued)** - A setting will have a much great chance of working if that young person feels as if they belong there. In not so many words, that drive for belonging was crucial from what we heard in **every setting** visited. How do we promote belonging in all our settings?
- **The balanced perspective** - Although it was clear from most young people that being in an AP outweighed their 'want' to be back within mainstream there were a few things they missed. For some they felt it limited their ability to make friends, attend things like a school prom or that it could be viewed by some in the future as a 'negative'. Others felt sad that mainstream hadn't worked out and believed strongly that

changes could be made which would help more young people re-access mainstream schooling. To summarise what can we learn from this report? What adaptations can be made? How can we ensure those who do access APs are not tarred with a negative brush as it's just another way to access education?

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**We may all be different but  
we have the same smile**