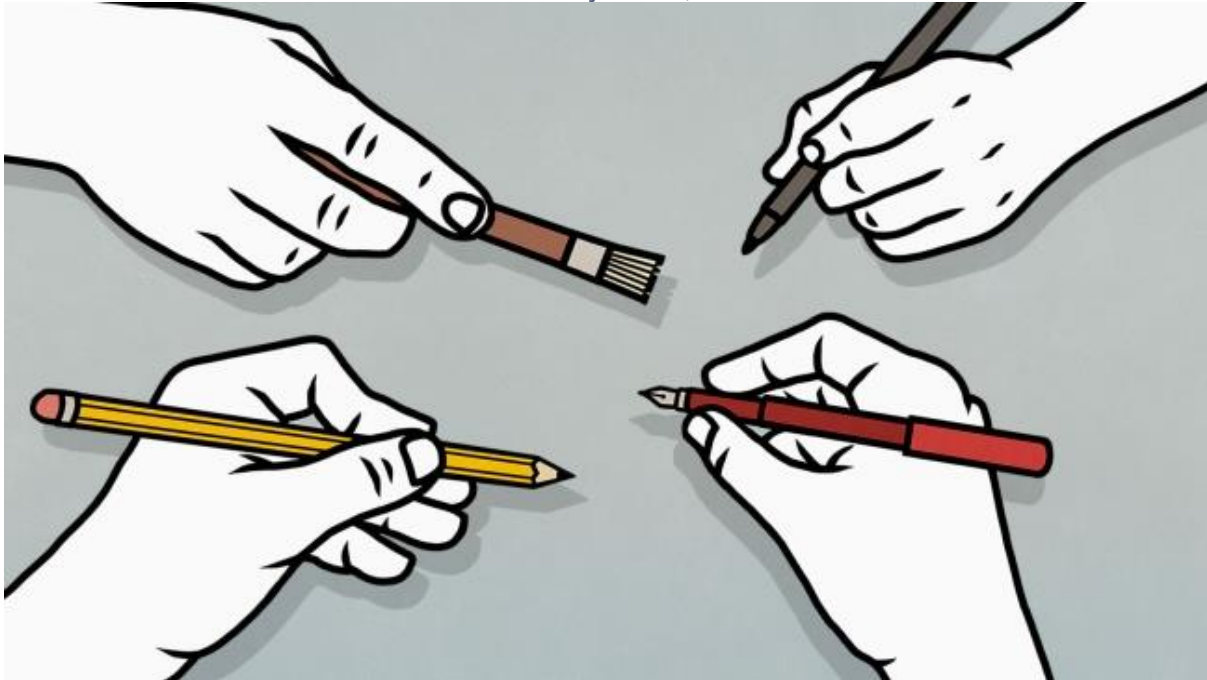


# Why a graduated teaching approach can work for SEND

Ofsted's proposals refer to a graduated teaching approach, which could be the engine to drive inclusive school improvement if implemented effectively, says

Margaret Mulholland

20th February 2025, 5:00am



While there are many disappointments around the new Ofsted proposals, I'd like to flag one aspect that could have tremendous positive impact if used comprehensively: the reference to a graduated teaching approach for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as seen in the [\*\*school inspection toolkit\*\*](#). This presents us with an opportunity to focus on an example of something that can work in doing inclusion well.

The graduated Assess-Plan-Do-Review (APDR) approach is a cycle of improvement that can operate at an individual child and whole-school level. It is an evidence-informed, micro-to-macro tool that has the potential to transform how schools address barriers to learning for all children.

And the approach offers multiple benefits when implemented effectively. It supports early identification and removal of barriers to learning; it can foster collaboration between school staff and families; it enables teachers and support staff to test and learn ways to support individuals.

It's an excellent methodology of formative assessment that can drive inclusion. I'd go so far as to rebrand it as the engine of support for inclusive school improvement.

# The graduated teaching approach

But we have previously seen inconsistent implementation of the graduated approach in England. In many cases it is narrowly perceived as a SEND-specific tool used primarily to gather evidence for education, health, and care plan (EHCP) applications. Too often it is seen a procedural requirement rather than an opportunity for proactive intervention and support.

On a Sendco forum recently the question was asked “Once we’ve done two rounds of the graduated approach and an EHCP is granted, the APDR cycle is done, right?”

No. This iterative process continually evolves and responds to the child’s journey through different environments and transitions in preparation for adulthood.

---

## More from Margaret Mulholland:

- **[This isn’t a SEND crisis, it’s an education crisis. Now let’s fix it](#)**
- **[Sendco NPQ funding shortfall is another SEND policy mess](#)**
- **[New attendance rules are unfair on vulnerable students](#)**

---

Some local authorities also appear to have misappropriated the graduated approach to delay support rather than facilitate it. Reports indicate that some authorities require extensive documentation from additional cycles before considering statutory assessment, a practice that is both illegal and counterproductive.

To unlock its full potential, use of the graduated approach requires rethinking and clearer guidance on how it can be applied systematically as a whole-school approach to meet all learning needs.

School leaders need support to better understand how the graduated approach can become integral to pedagogical practice and progression frameworks.

Educators in Ireland routinely use the approach to make classroom accommodations based on concerns about student progress or behaviour, not simply on “suspected SEND”.

The process emphasises collaboration between teachers, parents and school leaders to develop tailored interventions and support, and clear roles and responsibilities to ensure that all stakeholders understand their part in supporting inclusive education.

We should reframe the graduated approach as a problem-solving, solution-focused continuum. Let's make this intrinsic to our school improvement cycle and classroom pedagogy, not another SEND bolt-on.

*Margaret Mulholland is the special educational needs and inclusion specialist at the Association of School and College Leaders*

**Margaret Mulholland**