



About Principles Our Team Events
Ongoing Research Blog Resources



6 Sept

The rise of Internal Alternative Provision – what’s working and what’s tough

Dr Emma Simpson - senior research manager at [The Difference](https://www.thedifference.org.uk/) - emma@the-difference.com

An increasing number of schools across the country are investing in ‘Internal Alternative Provision’ (IAP) - provision within school for pupils at risk of exclusion or severe absence and which acts (at least partially) in place of mainstream lessons. This blog shares findings from the first part of research carried out by The Difference into current practices in IAP, with a focus on what is working well and common challenges^[1].

The research involved interviews with a sample of 18 IAP leads from English schools, selected to be representative in terms of geography, phase (primary/secondary) and stage in their IAP journey (planning, developed and established). They were recruited via an IAP network which The Difference set up in February 2024 to share practice, following high attendance at a presentation at our IncludEd conference^[2]. We were struck by the speed with which people joined this network (70 members in a few days) and their willingness to participate in research. There seems to be a thirst for information about good practice, driven by a surge in schools setting up or refining IAPs. The Difference’s research was designed to meet this need by moving with agility to collect, synthesise and share information.

Whilst there has been rich research in the Alternative Provision sector, the growth of schools ‘doing it for themselves’ (rather than relying on external provision) is new. It seems driven by three forces:

- an increase in the scale and complexity of pupil need
- schools’ desire to avoid exclusion and keep pupils within their community
- a shortage of high quality, cost effective, external alternative provision places.

Well-functioning IAPs also seem to drive and/or result from a culture shift in the perception of what to do with students who find it difficult to meet schools’ expectations of behaviour or to attend mainstream lessons. These IAPs are distinct from behaviour systems; rather than being punitive, reactive, separate spaces where pupils are sent to stop them disrupting others’ learning, they are intended to be supportive, proactive, planned approaches to inclusion which seek to maintain pupils’ relationship with the mainstream

school and deliver high quality curriculum alongside support for the social and emotional aspects of learning. Not all have achieved this vision, but these are the beliefs which underpin design. Below is an overview of practices which support this aim, and the common challenges.

What is working well?

For most secondary IAPs in the sample, the purpose is reintegration: for pupils to complete a period in the IAP before returning full time to mainstream lessons. Ideally, there is no sharp separation: pupils continue to share lunch and break times with mainstream peers and attend some lessons. Full reintegration is then done gradually, using hybrid timetables, and can take from six weeks to a year. This approach increases the capacity of the IAP to support larger numbers of pupils and therefore make it sustainable. However, it is most effective when flexible and responsive: pupils attend mainstream lessons in which they experience success and gradually increase these subjects but are not pressed to do this more quickly than they can manage.

All primary IAPs in the sample had a more stable cohort across the academic year. However, most pupils continued to spend at least some time in mainstream classrooms and share social time with peers. Reintegration the following academic year is an aim for those pupils for whom it feels possible. Others remain in the IAP or transfer to a special school.

At any one time, the ideal group size seems to be below 10 pupils, with two members of staff (one qualified teacher and one support staff). The emphasis in both primary and secondary IAPs is on re-engagement with learning as well as support for the social and emotional aspects of learning. Provision tends to include:

- **diagnosis/assessment** to better understand barriers to accessing mainstream lessons
- **intervention/therapeutic sessions** to respond to identified needs eg. literacy, speech and language therapy, emotional regulation, social skills
- **enrichment** such as gardening, cooking or animal husbandry which re-engages pupils in a hands-on, child-centered way and builds social bonds and skills
- **vocational learning**, particularly for KS4 students, which responds to interest and strengthens post-16 opportunities.
- **high quality curriculum delivery** preferably by well-qualified, specialist teachers, to enable pupils to keep pace with and access a comparable education to mainstream peers.

Staffing was identified as a critical element across the sample and was often cited as the reason a provision either worked well or needed significant change. As well as the ability to deliver sessions in an engaging way, successful staff build strong relationships, have skills and experience to address social and emotional needs and are responsive to the pupils in front of them. An important aspect of strong IAP practice is the space to be responsive and holistic. For example, through check-in routines which give pupils time to

surface and discuss what’s going on for them and to get into a mental state ready for learning, and regular movement breaks.

IAP staff need to communicate effectively with mainstream staff to support referral and reintegration processes and deliver training which promotes congruency between practices in the IAP and mainstream. You can put an ailing plant in a greenhouse to support recovery and build strength but if nothing changes in the garden, it will struggle when outside again. It is helpful when schools recognise that it is not just the child which needs to change, but aspects of the mainstream school environment. Two interviewees said that their IAP delivered the same curriculum as the mainstream, but in a more nurturing, responsive environment. This raises questions about what prevents mainstream classrooms from being sufficiently nurturing and responsive. It links to The Difference’s belief that whole school inclusion should meet the learning, wellbeing and safety needs of all pupils, supported by every member of staff, and so benefit all pupils, not only those who visibly struggle.

Common Challenges

Getting IAP right is not easy. As might be expected, funding came up as a constant challenge: money for space, staff and opportunities beyond the school gates. Recruitment and development of the right people is a challenge, particularly given how critical quality staff are to successful provision. Balancing the needs of current IAP students with those waiting for a place can also be difficult: in most schools there are more pupils who would benefit from the provision than there is space, which is a further reason for making mainstream classrooms as inclusive as possible.

The second part of this research involves detailed case studies of three to five IAPs and includes the perspectives of pupils. Fieldwork is scheduled for September-December 2024. The Difference aims to publish a full report of findings in March 2025.

Please feel free to get in touch with any questions or comments: emma@the-difference.com

You can sign up to The Difference’s fortnightly newsletter [here](#).

[1] These findings were first presented at an IAP symposium organised by The Difference in London in June 2024.

[2] The Difference runs an annual conference called IncludEd which brings together educators interested in building more inclusive practices in schools. The presentation referred to here shared findings from the scoping phase of research into IAP carried out in collaboration with NFER, funded by YEF and EEF, as part of a project called ‘School Choices’. The Difference’s independent IAP research has built on knowledge gained through this collaborative work.

What makes a good
internal provision for

Relationality in
Alternative Provision –
towards a more