

BOOK REVIEW

Supporting Children and Young People's Learning: A handbook for parents when their child needs additional support

S. Gray and J. Wallace

The Stationery Office (2006). pp.viii+182. Pbk. £8.99

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Reviewer: Jacqueline Ravet

The Education (Additional Support For Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 has heralded a new era in the field of pupil support. This Act has transformed the system for the identification and assessment of pupils with additional support needs and has specified new processes for the planning and provision of support in schools. For the first time, it has also set out exactly how parents and pupils must be consulted and involved in these processes so that their right to a say in matters of direct relevance to them can be upheld.

The Act in its original form is, of course, a highly complex and impenetrable document for the lay reader. Gray and Wallace have therefore done an excellent service for parents and education professionals, by translating a maze of legalese into a clear, concise text that is readable and easy to understand. Their handbook is a comprehensive guide that covers all of the features of the new system that must be understood by parents if they have a child in need of additional support in school.

The early chapters of the book provide an overview of key legislation and parent and pupil rights. The meaning of additional support needs is then clarified, and the assessment process is set out in detail. Much space in the third chapter is given over to an explanation of 'staged intervention' - how schools will ensure that pupil needs are met with the most appropriate level of support, and how children with severe and complex needs are to be provided for via a Coordinated Support Plans (CSP).

The process for opening a CSP will be of particular interest to parents with children who currently have a Record of Need. These are being phased out under the new legislation and must be replaced with a CSP, though not necessarily for all pupils, by 2007. Many parents will be anxious about this development and will welcome the thorough elucidation of the Act provided in Chapter 3. This is complemented by a detailed consideration, later on in the book, of the roles and obligations of education authorities, schools and other support services with regard to pupils with additional support needs. Clarification is also provided of the rights and responsibilities of parents and children and how, exactly, these might be exercised in practice.

Mechanisms for dealing with conflicts and complaints are also clearly explained and the reader is guided through what might otherwise be a bewildering array of committees and panels that have been put in place under the new legislation to provide a forum for the resolution of disputes of various sorts. It is difficult to see how parents could be expected to make sense of these complex arrangements without the help of a handbook like this! A useful flow chart summarises the various options open to parents and helps to simplify the matter considerably.

The final chapters of the handbook gather together a number of loose threads relating to other more general matters, such as how the Act articulates with legislation like the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001), the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), and The Human Rights Act (1998). Exclusion, physical intervention and restraint, and transport are amongst the other subheadings in this chapter. The book ends with a lengthy reference section and a list of contacts and websites that will be extremely valuable to those wishing to find out more about any of the matters raised within the book, or who need further advice and support from specialists.

One of the most valuable features that raises this handbook above other comparable publications is that it provides a very clear pathway through difficult territory without over-simplification or loss of detail. However, it is not a quick read and parents or teachers who simply want to know the basics would be advised to turn to shorter texts that summarise the legislation. Having said this, the book is well written, straightforward and clear, and the format includes helpful summary boxes that highlight important definitions or items from the Act. There are also useful tables and flow charts, plus illustrative case studies peppered throughout the text, which support the reader's understanding and bring what could be a rather 'dry read' to life.

This book will undoubtedly be of great value to parents of pupils with additional support needs. However, it will also be useful to class teachers, social workers and other professionals who have links to schools and obligations to pupils and parents under the new Act.