

iSC Research

Specialist Market Report

# Inclusion in International Schools

A global survey

2020

in collaboration with



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I believe a society can be measured  
by its capacity to nurture those  
who are most vulnerable.

Alex Widdowson, New York Times,  
January 15, 2020

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Schools on cover:  
GEMS Jumeirah Primary School, Dubai, UAE  
Dover Court International School, Singapore  
Jakarta Intercultural School, Indonesia

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This report summarises the results of the third global survey on the status of inclusion in international schools. The survey was developed by Next Frontier Inclusion in conjunction with ISC Research, and disseminated by ISC Research between November and December 2019, before the pandemic moved many schools online. Organisations like the Association for the Advancement of International Education (AAIE) also promoted the survey and provided members with access to participate.

It is satisfying to note that after the third such survey, the international school community has clearly accepted inclusion - in varying degrees - as a feature of our landscape. We are now at a point where we can take a closer look at inclusion-related issues at a more granular level and find ways, as a community, to resolve them.

Respectfully submitted,

*Ochan Kusuma-Powell*

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## What is inclusion, and why is it important?

Historically, international schools were perceived as institutions whose sole purpose was to prepare students for tertiary education. Over the last half century, as families have become more mobile, there has been increasing demand for schools also to support students who learn differently.

Consequently, international schools are having to learn how to achieve both academic rigour and excellence, as well as equity of access to the curriculum. As we begin the third decade of the 21st Century, inclusion is one of the greatest challenges facing international schools. While some have led the way on innovative inclusive practice, others are just beginning the journey. International schools are at different stages of inclusive development, determining the extent to which they are able to serve students with special educational needs.

While there is no single definition of inclusion or inclusive schools, inclusion itself necessitates shared values, beliefs and understandings. Thus, a common language is a prerequisite at an organisational level.

NFI's definition continues to evolve as we learn.

*An international school is inclusive when it has made the intentional decision to develop diverse student and faculty populations that reflect society as a whole, including multilingual learners and students with diverse learning profiles. These schools take a systems approach to building capacity amongst stakeholders, offering universal design for access to all aspects of school life.*

NFI Revised Definition, 2020

Despite the volatility and uncertainty of our world today, inclusion will remain an important feature of the international school landscape for some time. Students will always require our care and attention.

### Four dimensions of inclusive international schools

NFI has found several landscapes that schools travel on their journey towards inclusion. These landscapes fall into four domains (NFI, 2020):

1. Building common meaning and community commitment
2. Designing and integrating the programme
3. Developing professional capacity
4. Evaluating and improving the programme

It is our hope that schools find these categories useful in reviewing their own programmes of support.

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## Definitions of service levels

NFI is committed to serving the international school community by standardising the use of terms, as much as possible. In line with this, NFI has recently published a revised definition of service levels, based on the profiles of student needs. Previous definitions focused on the location of services (e.g. “push in” or “pull out”) rather than on student learning needs.

**Mild:** Student profiles include high incidence learning differences, requiring differentiated instruction in class and interventions in identified areas. Students may qualify for formal accommodations. Typical service delivery may range from monitoring to some direct intervention, potentially delivered through consultation and formal monitoring, co-teaching, and small group interventions. Students with mild profiles may also include the need for occupational, speech-language or social-emotional therapies as a primary need.

**Moderate:** Student profiles include high incidence learning differences. Student achievement is two or more years below grade-level expectations in one or more areas. Profiles are more complex and may include multiple diagnoses and/or social-emotional or behavioral issues, and/or need for allied health services (e.g. speech-language or occupational therapy). A small number of moderate students may require curricular modifications in one or more areas. Students regularly receive accommodations and will require regular interventions to support requisite educational skills. Typical range of service delivery models may include co-teaching, therapies, and small group interventions.

**Intensive:** Student profiles include low incidence learning differences most regularly identified as cognitive in nature, e.g. students with intellectual disabilities. Access to the full school curriculum is limited, and modifications in most areas will be required. Specialised curriculum will be required for functional academics, adaptive and life skills in tandem with integration to selected and supported modified regular curriculum access. Service delivery models include co-teaching, self-contained, small group interventions and allied health therapies. Medical interventions may also be required. The student will require an alternative pathway to a best matched post-secondary option.

## Purpose of the survey

This survey was disseminated to determine what trends, if any, might be deduced about the status of inclusion in international schools worldwide. A new question was added, asking schools to identify and prioritise support and professional learning services. With minor edits, survey questions were otherwise very similar to those questions distributed in 2017; both NFI and ISC Research contributed to the current version of the questionnaire. These results can be compared to earlier surveys (2016; 2017) on inclusion.

Another purpose of the survey is to ensure that inclusion remains a topic of conversation in international schools. NFI has observed that when schools develop and launch new programmes to serve students with special academic or linguistic needs, the process itself generates a great deal of energy. However, once a programme has been established and has been up and running for a few years, that energy will often dissipate. Without a doubt, the inclusion of children with learning and linguistic needs remains strenuous work, requiring the consistent advocacy of school leadership. There is no mistake that, around the world, international schools with robust support programmes also have champions at the leadership level. It is for this reason that surveys like this are necessary, to remind us all of the importance of including young people for whom traditional learning may be challenging.

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## 2017 to 2019: Notable changes

Many results remain the same from the last inclusion survey of international schools which was conducted in 2017. Some noteworthy differences include the following:

- In comparison to results from 2017, a greater percent (> 9%) of international schools report themselves to be at the beginning of the journey towards inclusion, interested in what other schools are doing, and wanting to learn more.
- A higher percentage of international schools (> 6%) acknowledged having students with mental health or emotional conditions requiring interventions.
- There is an increase of almost 6% of international schools who serve students with special learning needs primarily in the mainstream classroom with the learning specialist serving as a consultant.
- Since the first administration of this survey in 2016, there has been a steady decline, of almost 10%, in schools reporting the presence of students with exceptionally high intellectual gifts in their populations.
- There is a drop in schools reporting that children with learning needs are served entirely by qualified educators (-7.19%).
- A greater percent of schools (> 11%) report that students who require both EAL and Learning Support are served through the Learning Support/SEN programme. There is also a large increase (>15%) in schools that report having an EAL programme.



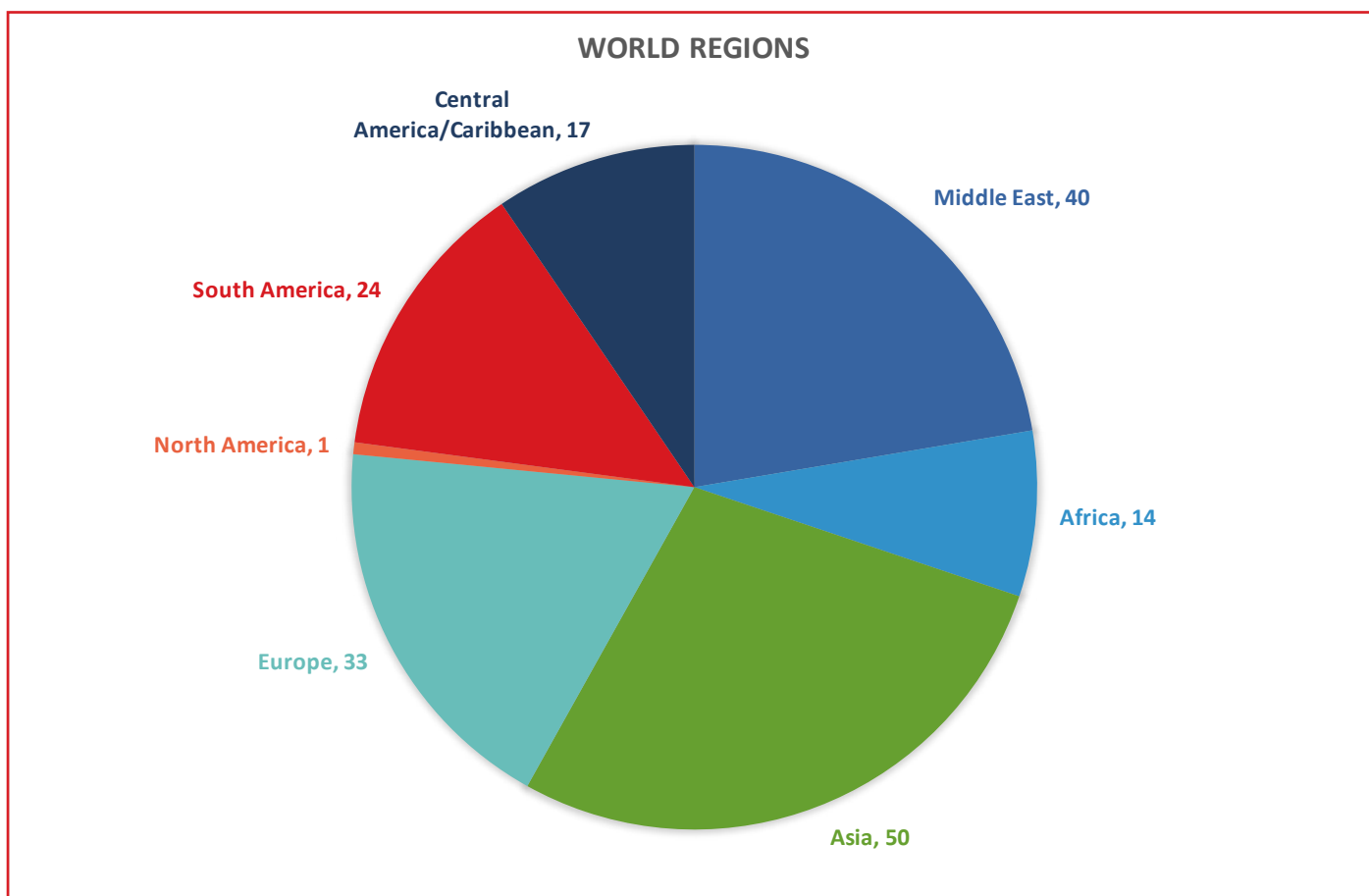
## Research process and participants

A link to the survey was sent out to all the international schools in the ISC Research database. A number of international school organisations, like the Association for the Advancement of International Education (AAIE), also promoted the survey and provided members with access to participate.

ISC Research defines an international school as a school that delivers a curriculum to any combination of pre-school, primary or secondary students, wholly or partly in English outside an English-speaking country or, if a school in a country where English is one of the official languages, offers an English-medium curriculum other than the country's national curriculum and the school is international in its orientation.

The survey consisted of 11 questions.

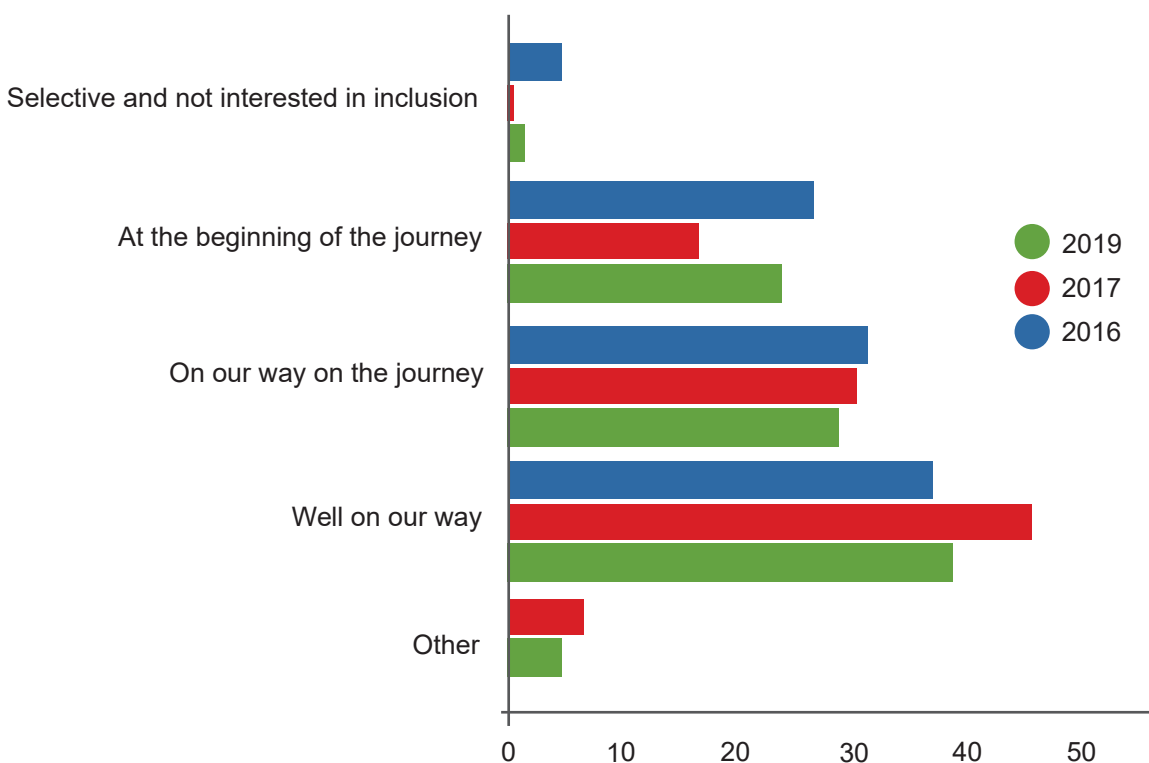
Responses were received from 207 international schools, representing 69 countries from the following world regions:



## Survey results

### 1. The journey towards inclusion

This question asks schools for a self-assessment of where they consider themselves to be on their journey towards inclusion.



**QUESTION:** We consider our school to be...

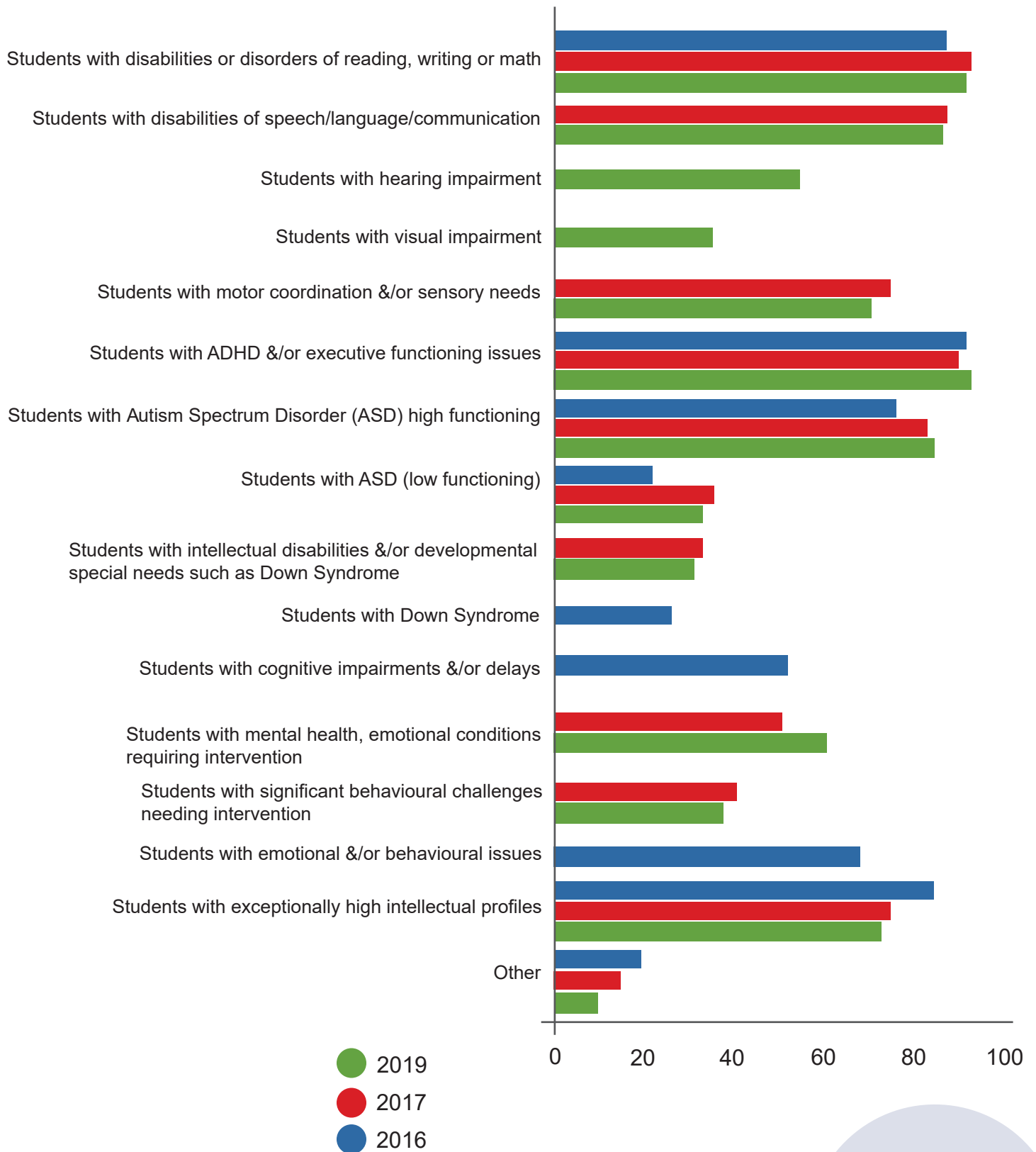
**ANSWER CHOICES:**

	2016	2017	2019
Selective & not interested in inclusion	4.5%	0.48%	1.46%
At the beginning of the journey towards inclusion. We are interested in what other schools are doing. We want to learn more.	26.7%	16.63%	25.73%
We are on our way on the journey. Not everything is in place, but we have leadership & community commitment. We are working on a multi-year action plan.	31.5%	30.36%	27.67%
We are well on our way. Policies, protocols & personnel are in place. We can still grow. We take pride in the learning diversity of our students.	37.2%	45.78%	39.32%
Other	-	6.75%	5.83%

Compared to 2017, a greater percentage of schools (>9%) identify themselves as being at the start of the journey towards inclusion. This may have to do with the organic nature of schools: given leadership and staff turnover, schools may find themselves in high resource for inclusion at one point in their history, and in lower resource at a different time.

## 2. The incidence of inclusion categories within international schools

This question asks schools to report which categories of high incidence populations they admit.



**QUESTION:** Our school admits students with the following learning differences, select descriptors as apply...

**ANSWER CHOICES:**

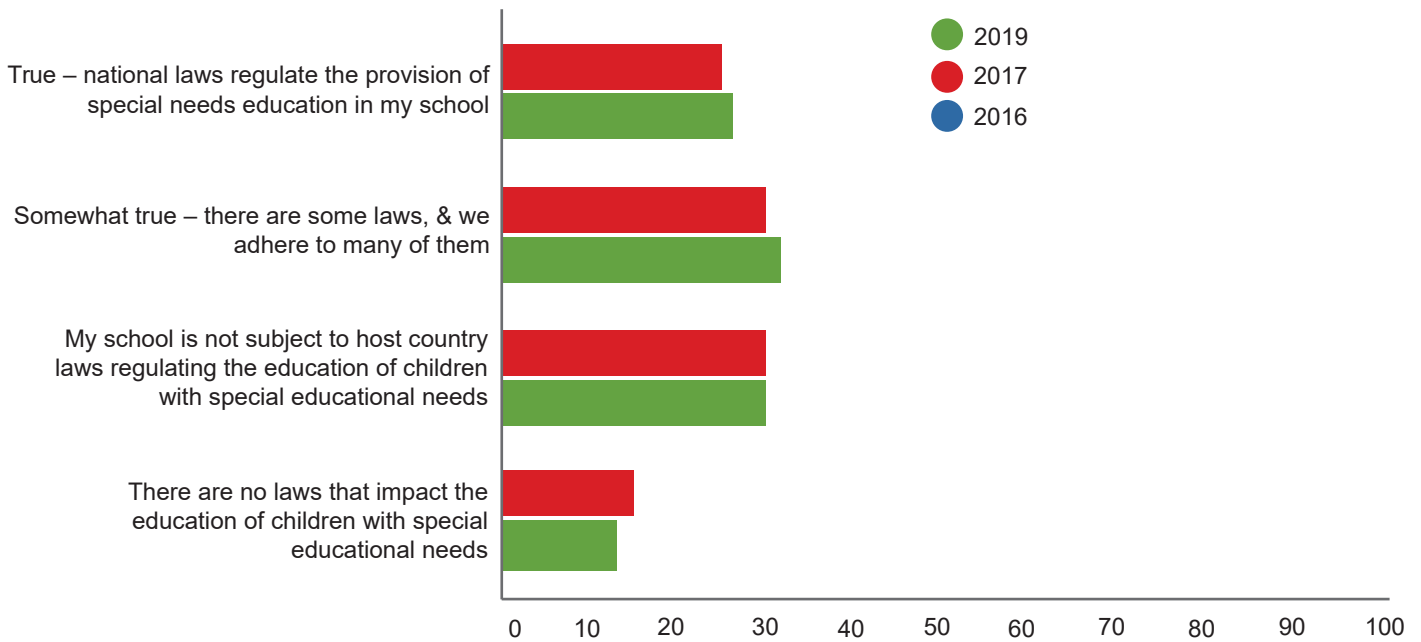
	2016	2017	2019
Students with disabilities or disorders of reading, writing or math	87.4%	94.20%	92.20%
Students with disabilities of speech/language/communication	-	86.23%	85.85%
Students with hearing impairment	-	-	57.07%
Students with visual impairment	-	-	38.54%
Students with motor coordination &/or sensory needs	-	73.43%	71.71%
Students with ADHD &/or executive functioning issues	89.5%	89.37%	91.71%
Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) high functioning	75.5%	81.64%	82.93%
Students with ASD (low functioning)	21.1%	34.78%	32.20%
Students with intellectual disabilities &/or developmental special needs such as Down Syndrome	-	34.30%	32.20%
Students with Down Syndrome	25.5%	-	-
Students with cognitive impairments &/or delays	53.8%	-	-
Students with mental health, emotional conditions requiring intervention	-	53.86%	60.00%
Students with significant behavioural challenges needing intervention	-	39.86%	35.12%
Students with emotional &/or behavioural issues	68.1%	-	-
Students with exceptionally high intellectual profiles	83.8%	76.57%	73.66%
Other	19.2%	14.98%	9.76%

There may be a variety of reasons for the increase (> 6%) in percent of schools recognising students with mental health and emotional conditions requiring intervention, including greater awareness of the emotional needs of young people. The percentage may have been higher, had the survey been conducted in the spring of 2020 when most schools were in lockdown.

Of interest is the steady decline, since 2016, in percent of schools reporting the presence of students with exceptionally high intellectual profiles. Assuming that the percentage of students with high intellectual gifts remains the same in the general population, there may be a number of reasons for this trend, including: a) schools are providing appropriate challenges for students in this category; b) the definition of 'exceptionally high intellectual profiles' is context-dependent; c) students in this category may be under-identified; and e) other. This is an area for further inquiry.

### 3. Laws impacting special needs provision

This questions asks schools whether host country laws influence their provision for children with special educational needs.



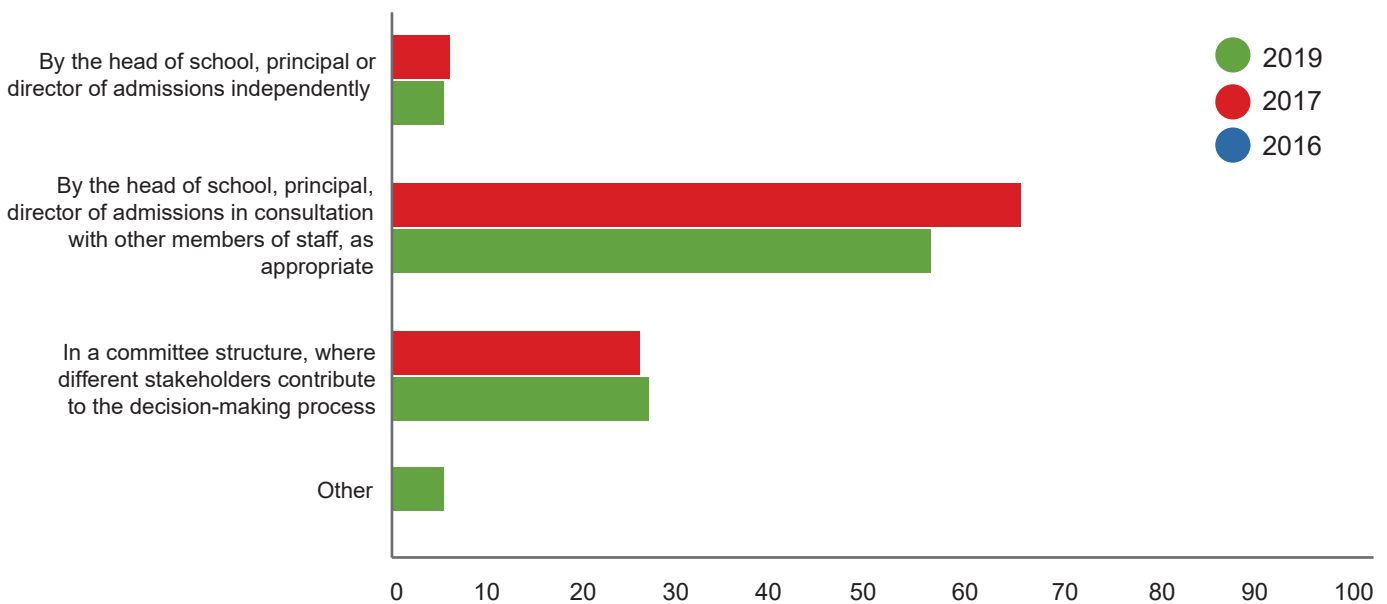
**QUESTION:** Our school’s policies and practices regarding the education of children with special needs are influenced by host country laws in the country our school is located

ANSWER CHOICES	2016	2017	2019
True – national laws regulate the provision of special needs education in my school	-	24.39%	25.85%
Somewhat true – there are some laws, & we adhere to many of them	-	26.59%	29.76%
My school is not subject to host country laws regulating the education of children with special educational needs	-	29.76%	29.76%
There are no laws that impact the education of children with special educational needs	-	19.27%	14.63%

Similar to responses in the 2017 survey, responses to this question may well be influenced by the perceptions of the respondent as to whether international schools are subject to local laws on special education provision. In many cases, responses did not reflect the existence of host country laws governing the education of children with special educational needs.

## 4. Student admissions

This question explores the process by which schools handle complex admissions applications from students with special educational needs.



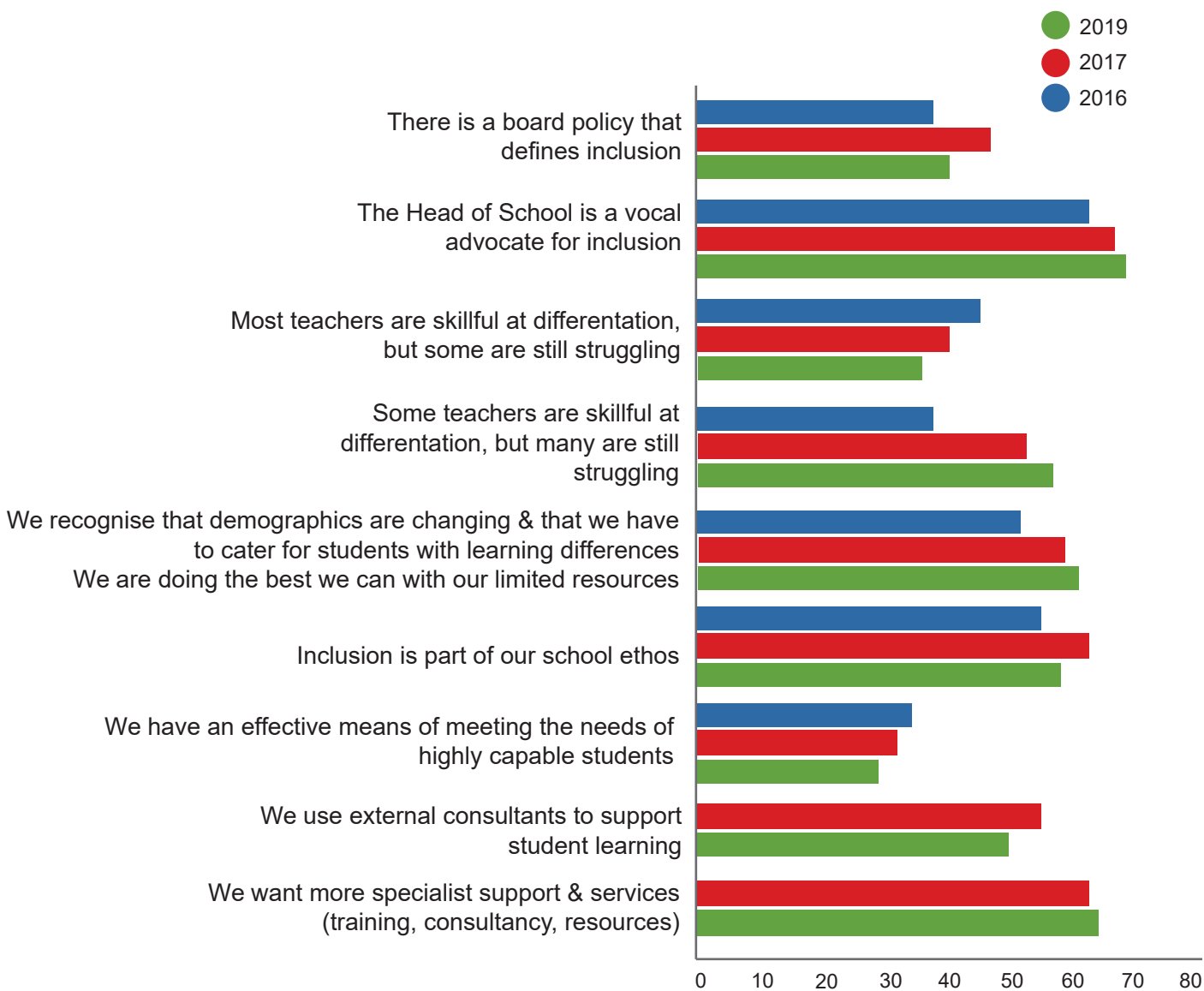
**QUESTION:** Complex admissions applications involving students with special educational needs are handled...

ANSWER CHOICES:	2016	2017	2019
By the head of school, principal or director of admissions independently.	-	7.35%	7.28%
By the head of school, principal, director of admissions in consultation with other members of staff, as appropriate.	-	65.69%	58.25%
In a committee structure, where different stakeholders contribute to the decision-making process.	-	26.96%	27.67%
Other	-	-	6.80%

The most common process for the intake of complex admissions cases remains with the head of school, principal, or director of admissions, in consultation with other members of staff, as appropriate. As an observation, while a committee structure is more cumbersome, it is probably more likely to generate a multi-faceted perspective of the student applicant.

## 5. School descriptors

This question asks schools to report themselves on a series of descriptors.



**QUESTION:** At our school (please select as many as apply to your school)...

<b>ANSWER CHOICES</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2019</b>
There is a board policy that defines inclusion.	38.5%	47.83%	40.00%
The Head of School is a vocal advocate for inclusion.	62.7%	66.67%	68.78%
Most teachers are skillful at differentiation, but some are still struggling.	45.8%	40.58%	37.56%
Some teachers are skillful at differentiation, but many are still struggling.	39.2%	52.66%	57.07%
We recognise that demographics are changing & that we have to cater for students with learning differences. We are doing the best we can with our limited resources.	51.6%	59.42%	60.00%
Inclusion is part of our school ethos.	54.7%	61.11%	58.54%
We have an effective means of meeting the needs of highly capable students.	35.3%	32.37%	29.27%
We use external consultants to support student learning.	-	54.11%	50.24%
We want more specialist support & services (training, consultancy, resources).	-	62.80%	63.37%

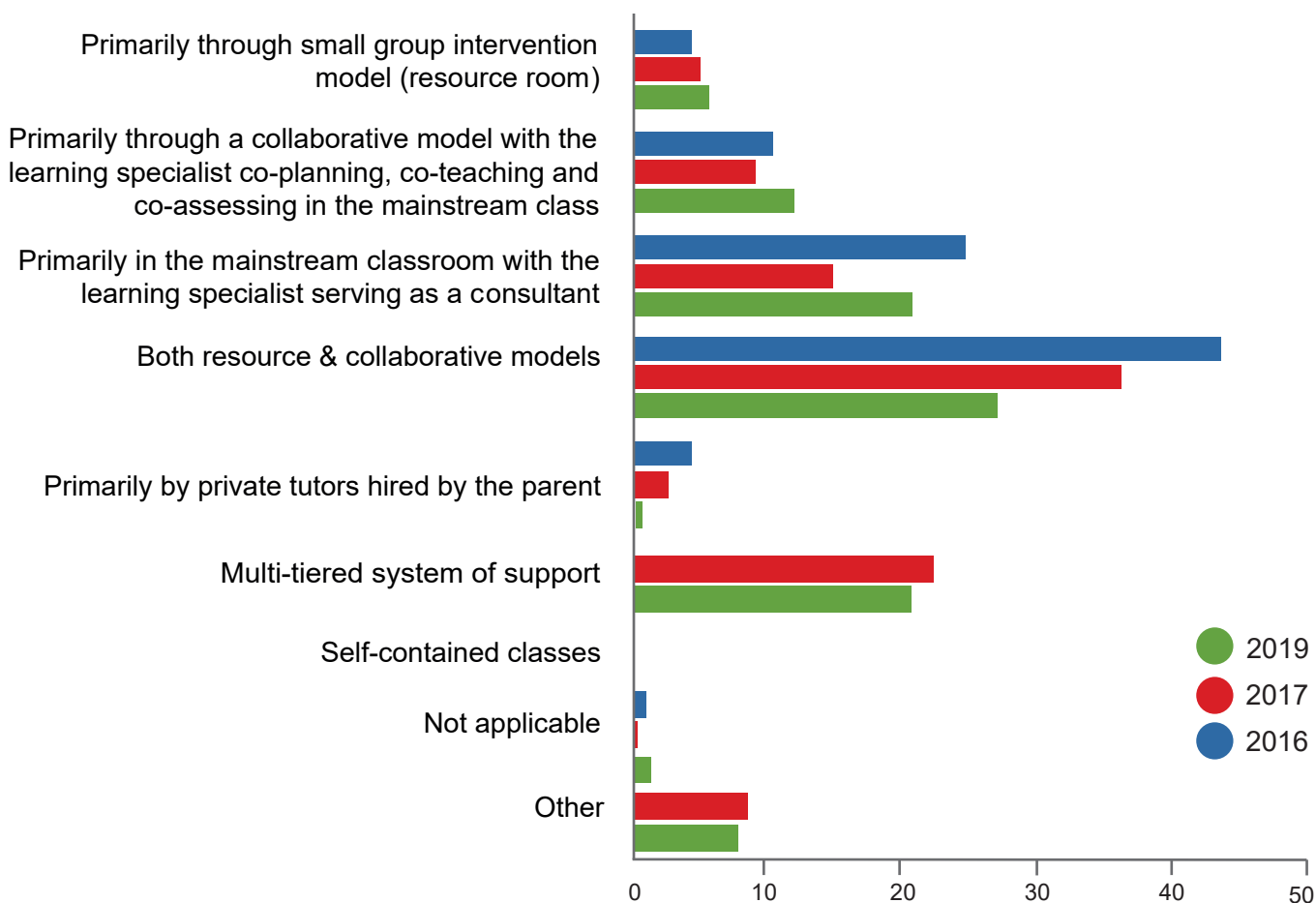
The percent of schools reporting an effective means of meeting the needs of highly capable students remains an area of interest. Almost 74% of schools report accepting highly capable students, and only 29.27% report satisfaction with how they serve this population.



## 6. Service delivery

This question asks how services are provided to children with special learning needs.

A Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is an over-arching umbrella term that refers to a layered continuum of services. This layered continuum incorporates a focus on curriculum, social and emotional well-being and positive behavioural intervention services. Readers familiar with Response to Intervention (RtI) will recognize that RtI is the curricular and instructional component of MTSS. MTSS has a design focus which is supportive of all children. As intervention teams determine that increasingly focused services are required for a specific student, these are included (layered) and aligned with the basic intervention plans for that child and may include ancillary services to be found within the community (e.g. therapies, counselling, etc.). Thus, all services are not only aligned, but also coordinated by a team and case manager.



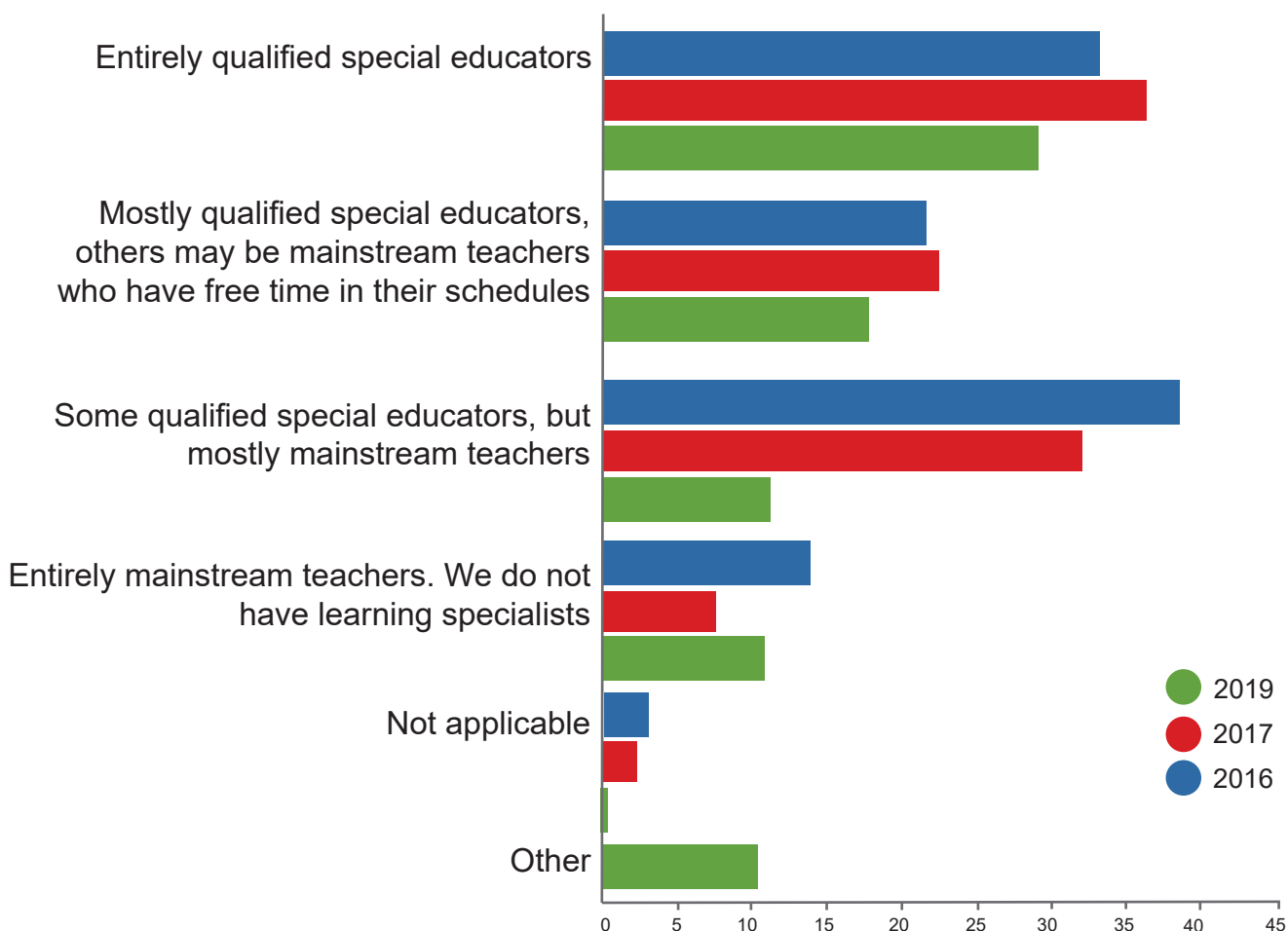
**QUESTION:** Students identified with learning differences at our school are served...

<b>ANSWER CHOICES:</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2019</b>
Primarily through small group intervention model (resource room).	4.6%	5.07%	6.31%
Primarily through a collaborative model with the learning specialist co-planning, co-teaching and co-assessing in the mainstream class.	10.5%	9.18%	13.11%
Primarily in the mainstream classroom with the learning specialist serving as a consultant.	25%	14.98%	20.87%
Both resource and collaborative models.	43.9%	36.47%	27.67%
Primarily by private tutors hired by the parent.	8.7%	2.66%	1.46%
Multi-tiered system of support.	-	22.22%	20.39%
Self-contained classes.	-	0.00%	0.00%
Not applicable.	2.5%	0.97%	2.43%
Other.	-	8.45%	7.77%

While definitions for ‘mild’, ‘moderate’ and ‘intensive’ needs were provided in the survey, the answer choices for question 6 conflate ‘location’ with ‘purpose’ of intervention, making it difficult to come to conclusions from the data gathered. Areas for further attention include greater clarity of answer choices in any future survey, as well as the longer term need to develop common meaning in vocabulary usage across international schools.

## 7. Specialist qualifications

Schools are asked to assess the credentials of adults working with children with learning differences.



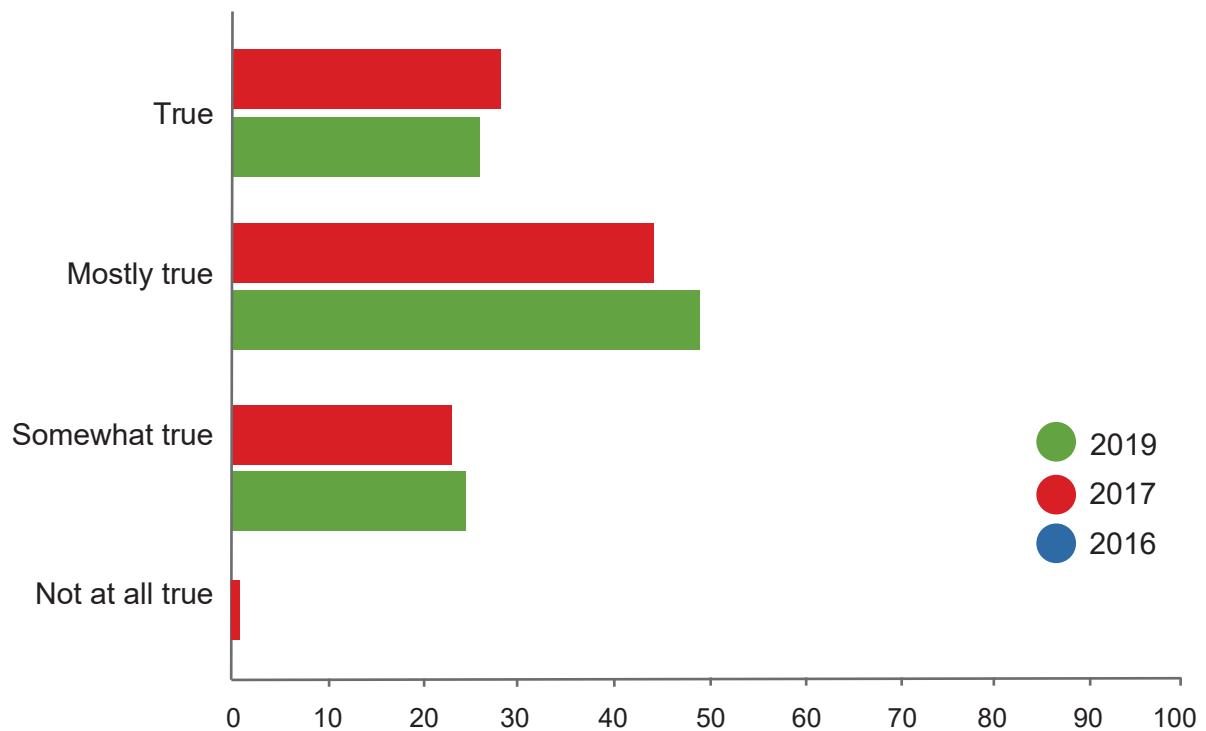
**QUESTION:** The professional staff at our school who work with students with learning differences are...

ANSWER CHOICES	2016	2017	2019
Entirely qualified special educators.	33%	36.32%	29.13%
Mostly qualified special educators, others may be mainstream teachers who have free time in their schedules.	21.5%	22.28%	17.96%
Some qualified special educators, but mostly mainstream teachers.	38.6%	31.72%	12.14%
Entirely mainstream teachers. We do not have learning specialists.	14%	7.51%	12.14%
Not applicable.	2.75%	2.18%	0.49%
Other.	-	-	10.68%

'Other' comments mentioned qualified mainstream teachers who had experience or interest in the field of special education, who were not certified to teach in this field.

## 8. A shared responsibility

This question asks schools to report the extent to which regular education (mainstream) teachers also feel responsible for the education of children with special learning needs.



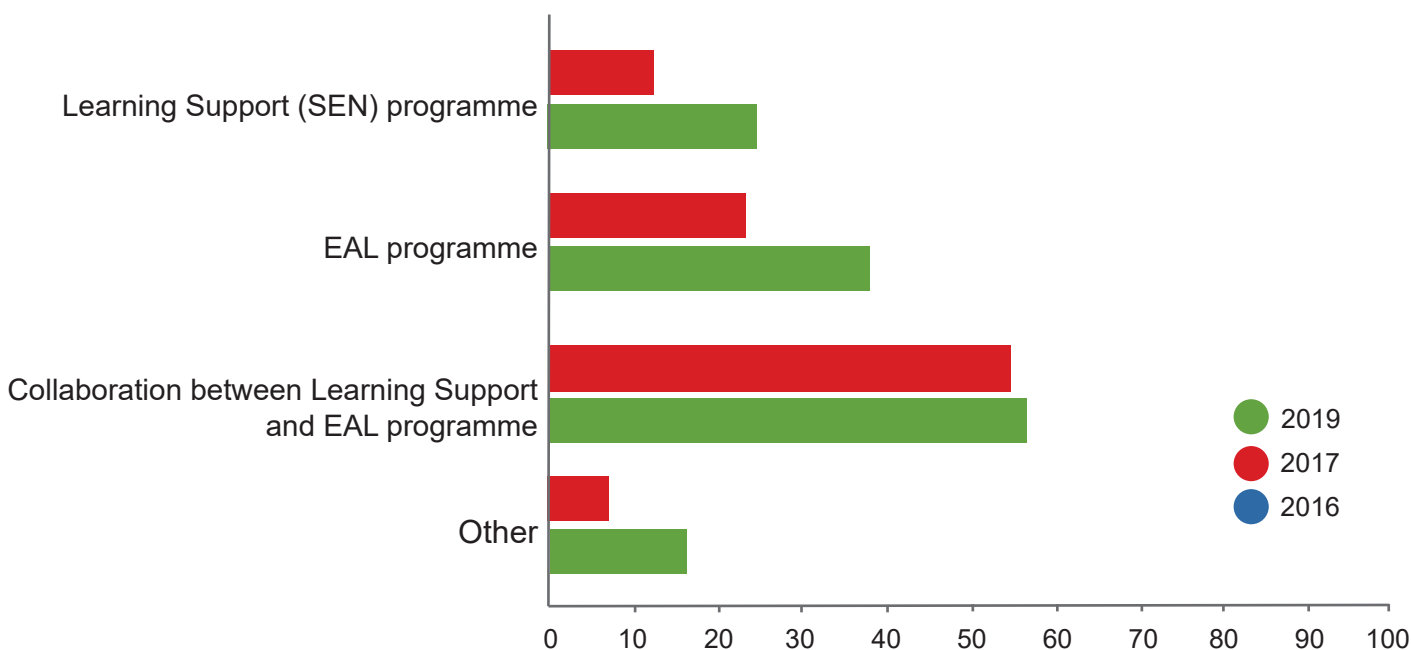
**QUESTION:** Class teachers at our school feel responsible for the education of children with learning needs...

ANSWER CHOICES	2016	2017	2019
True	-	32.45%	28.16%
Mostly true	-	43.34%	48.06%
Somewhat true	-	22.76%	23.79%
Not at all true	-	1.45%	0.00%

Results for this question are largely similar to the 2017 survey, with a very slight increase in the percent of schools responding 'Mostly true' in terms of shared responsibility between class teacher and specialist.

## 9. Support for students who require both EAL and Learning Support

Schools are asked to report on the provision for students with both English as an Additional Language and Learning Support needs.



**QUESTION:** Students who are identified as English language learners with learning differences are supported through...

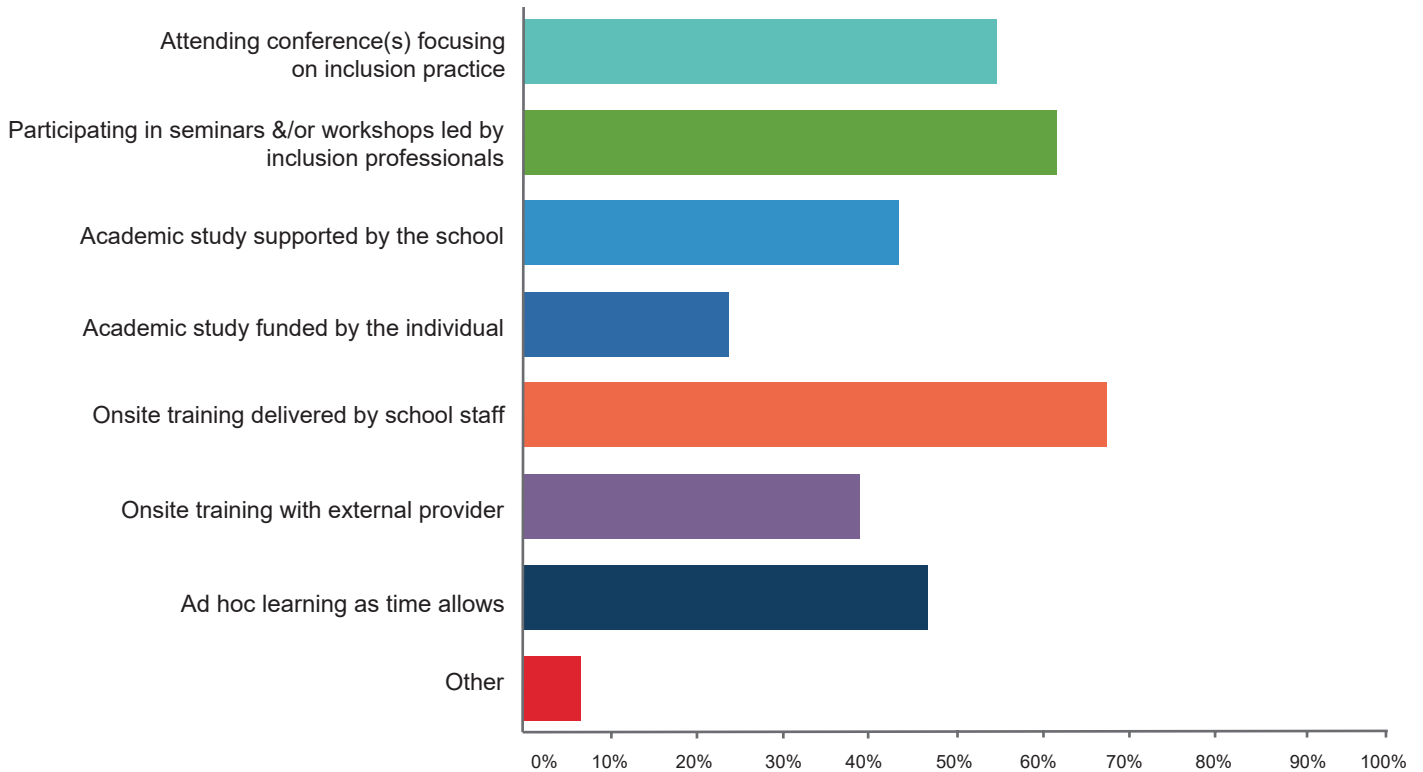
**ANSWER CHOICES**

	2016	2017	2019
Learning Support (SEN) programme	-	13.24%	24.27%
EAL programme	-	23.77%	39.32%
Collaboration between Learning Support and EAL programme	-	54.66%	55.34%
Other	-	8.33%	16.02%

As noted earlier, there is an increase (>11%) in the percent of schools reporting that multilingual learners are being served through the learning support programme and an increase (>15%) in schools reporting EAL programmes. The second is encouraging, although comments in this section also give rise to concerns as to how, or to what extent, multilingual learners with learning differences are being well-served. Several schools reported not having EAL programmes; or that multilingual children were served through immersion (not explained); through the English department; in after-school classes; and through the Learning Support programme. Another comment noted that subject teachers did 'the best they can.' This should be an area for further study.

## 10. Current support and professional learning services

Schools are asked to report which professional learning opportunities and resources they thought would be useful in their context.



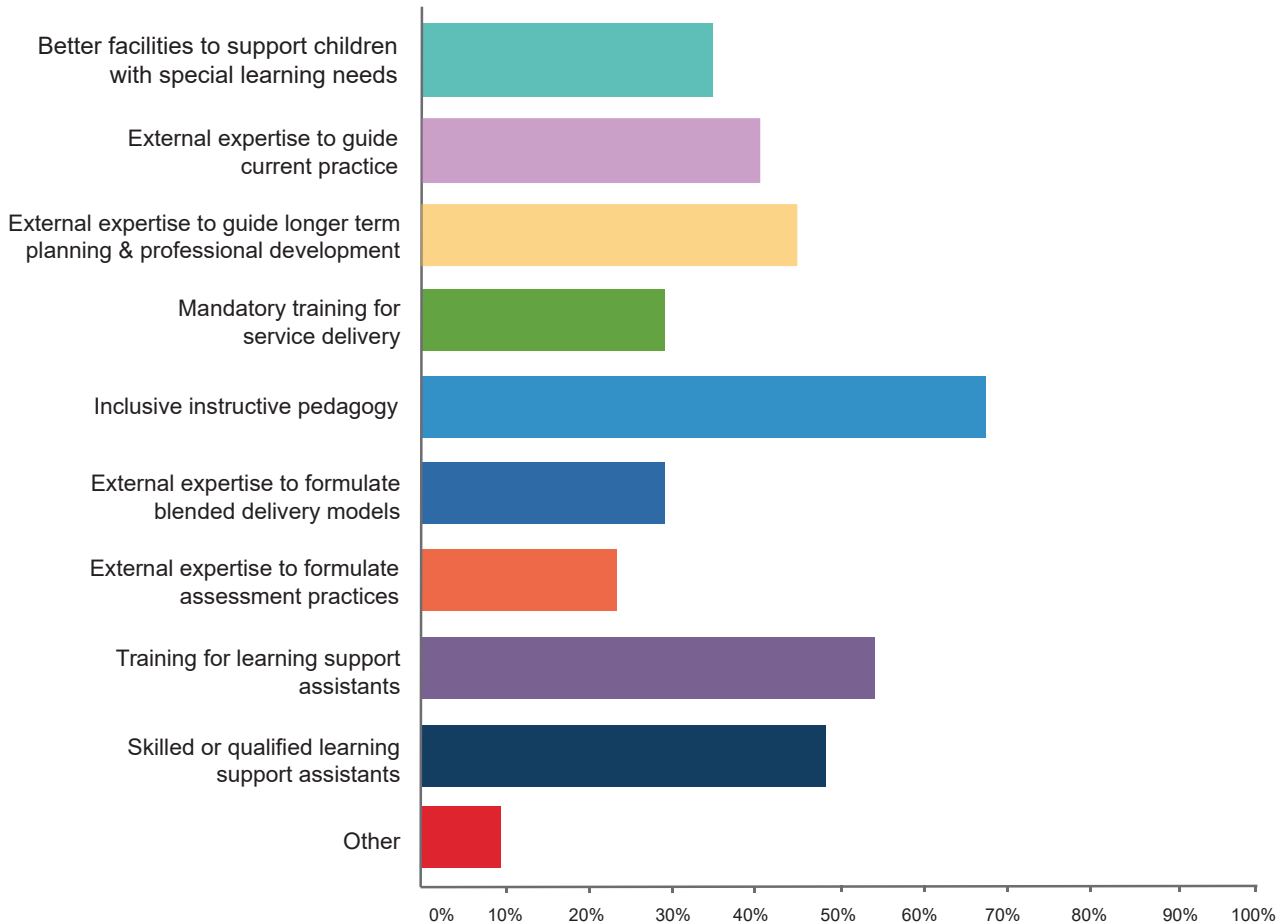
**QUESTION:** At our school the ongoing professional development of our inclusion department currently includes...

ANSWER CHOICES	2019
Attending conference(s) focusing on inclusion practice.	54.90%
Participating in seminars &/or workshops led by inclusion professionals.	61.76%
Academic study supported by the school.	42.65%
Academic study funded by the individual.	24.02%
Onsite training delivered by school staff.	67.16%
Onsite training with external provider.	39.22%
Ad hoc learning as time allows.	47.06%
Other.	6.37%

It would appear that quite a lot is going on in schools in terms of professional learning. It is not clear from the data to what extent teachers engage in the offerings and whether those attending are representative of all teachers, or only those providing learning support.

## 11. Desired support services

This question asks schools to identify perceived needs in the areas of support and professional learning.



**QUESTION:** At our school, the support & professional learning services that we believe would be most valuable to us are...

### ANSWER CHOICES

2019

Better facilities to support children with special learning needs.	34.95%
External expertise to guide current practice.	41.26%
External expertise to guide longer term planning & professional development.	45.63%
Mandatory training for service delivery.	30.10%
Inclusive instructive pedagogy.	67.96%
External expertise to formulate blended delivery models.	29.61%
External expertise to formulate assessment practices.	23.79%
Training for learning support assistants.	54.85%
Skilled or qualified learning support assistants.	48.54%
Other.	9.71%

Results clearly highlight a need for professional learning in inclusive instructive pedagogy, with almost 70% selecting this response.

An interesting result was the weight given to the training of educational assistants. While these adults are usually the least trained of any stakeholder group, they often spend quite a lot of time with children in programme. Thus, the responses would suggest a need to professionalise and develop the capacity of this group of adults. In many instances, they have been locally recruited, value their connections to the school, and may be looking to stay with the organisation for the longer term.



## Conclusions

In line with results from the two previous global inclusion surveys of international schools (data of which has been provided here), the results suggest that learning support programmes are an established feature of most international schools. There is also a recognition that students with learning needs are present in international schools and that schools have a responsibility to support their learning. NFI has observed that despite the most 'water-tight' of admissions policies, students with learning needs will surface in all schools; thus, it is not surprising that international schools are developing programmes of support.

Results of the new question (question 11), asking schools to identify and prioritise support and professional learning services, underscore a need for professional learning in inclusive instructive pedagogy. For some educators, this will involve a level of technical learning ("How do I go about . . .?") whereas for others, it may be more complex ("I've been teaching successfully for many years, and now you expect me to be inclusive as well?"). It would be a mistake to think one round of professional learning in the area of inclusive instructional pedagogy would be sufficient for all learners (Drago-Severson, 2009).

Two areas of concern emerge from the survey. The first has to do with how multilingual learners who also experience difficulties with learning are being served in international schools. The second has to do with the need for a common language between international schools.

### Further questions and recommendations

International schools need to work collaboratively to develop a common language with common meaning and understanding of terms used in the area of special needs education. Because it is a volatile and fast developing field, and because the use of language is often context dependent, educators from one part of the world may find that language used in one setting to mean something different in another. International schools coming together to explore common meaning will support the development of shared language.

Further attention also needs to be given to services for multilingual learners who experience difficulties with learning. While a greater percent of schools report having an EAL programme, and while most schools (>55%) serve these students through a collaborative process between EAL and learning support, comments from the 'Other' section raised concerns about the extent to which these children are being well-supported in schools without EAL programmes. Collaboration between learning support, EAL and mainstream class teachers will require encouragement and training.

There are at least two areas missing from this survey, which will be included in the next iteration. The first has to do with an examination of student demographics within learning support programmes, to determine whether any over- or under- representation of specific cultural groups might exist within a school or region. The second has to do with the intentions of support programmes in international schools. In some schools, the purpose is to support students in accessing the curriculum and completing assignments. While task completion may serve the student in the short term, the purpose of support programmes really needs to focus on skills development as well as the development of student self-knowledge, metacognition, independence, and self-advocacy.

## References

Drago-Severson, E. (2009). *Leading adult learning: Supporting adult development in our schools*. Thousand Oaks, Ca.: Corwin.

Next Frontier Inclusion. (2013). *Towards inclusion: Planning our path – An inclusive audit protocol*. New York: NFI.

Next Frontier Inclusion. (in press). *Towards inclusion: Planning our path – An inclusive audit protocol, 2nd Edition*. New York: NFI.



Next Frontier Inclusion is a non-profit membership organisation whose mission is to support schools on their journeys as they become increasingly inclusive of children with special educational needs. NFI's goal is to have at least one inclusive school in each major city of the world. NFI organises professional conversations several times a year in different continents and hemispheres in order to facilitate learning between schools and present recent findings in the field. NFI publications are free to member schools and target specific areas to do with inclusion. More information is available at [www.nextfrontierinclusion.org](http://www.nextfrontierinclusion.org)



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