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Concerns Grow Over Special Needs Reform as Government Promises Protection

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Ministers have insisted that children's legal rights to support under Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) will be protected, despite rising concerns about potential cuts and inconsistencies in provision. The reassurance follows widespread criticism from parents, educators, and campaigners over plans to reform the special educational needs system in England.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson told Parliament that while reforms were necessary to fix a “broken” system, there would be no erosion of statutory entitlements for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The remarks came amid growing anxiety that changes could further marginalise vulnerable pupils and place additional strain on overstretched local authorities.

Phillipson’s pledge follows significant backlash after reports suggested some councils were planning to tighten eligibility criteria for EHCPs to manage spiralling costs. These legally binding documents are supposed to ensure consistent support for children with complex needs, but in practice, provision varies widely by region, an issue the government acknowledges but has yet to address in concrete terms.

Former Education Secretary Lord David Blunkett added his voice to the debate, urging ministers to handle any reforms with “incredible sensitivity.” He noted the increased number of parents forced to resort to tribunals just to secure basic support for their children, calling the system “deeply adversarial” and burdensome for families already under pressure.

Critics have warned that the central government is failing to provide clear direction or adequate funding, leaving councils to make difficult decisions under financial duress. A number of Conservative MPs have also expressed concern that reforms, if mishandled, could damage trust with families and create long-term inequalities in educational access.

While Labour ministers claim the reforms aim to streamline bureaucracy and improve consistency, many view the moves as an attempt to contain spending without confronting the underlying inefficiencies or resourcing gaps. The Department for Education has committed to introducing new

national standards, but implementation timelines remain vague, and questions persist over whether they will be properly enforced.

Parents and SEND organisations have called for greater transparency and stronger safeguards to ensure that no child is left behind in a system already strained by delays, funding shortfalls, and patchy delivery.

As it stands, the government's reassurances may offer little comfort to families still battling to secure the support their children are entitled to by law. Without decisive leadership and practical reform rooted in fairness, not just cost-cutting, the problems facing the SEND system are unlikely to be resolved.