

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills 27 June 2017

Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to attend here today. I wish to introduce my colleague, Ms Madeleine Hickey who is the Director of the Special Education Support Service (SESS) – one of the three support services currently transitioning to the National Council for Special Education.

The NCSE wishes to be as helpful as we can be to assist you with your work in examining the adequacy of training and supports available to providers of special needs education.

Support for special education is a key government priority. Some €1.7bn, which is over 17% of the total Department of Education and Skills budget, is spent on supporting special education.

All students with special educational needs are taught primarily by the class or subject teacher. The additional funding provides for some 13,000 additional teachers allocated specifically to give extra support to students with additional learning and special needs: there is one special education teacher for every five mainstream class or subject teachers. There are also 13,000 Special Needs Assistant posts, assistive technology, special equipment, special school transport arrangements and so on.

I know that you have already seen the NCSE's written submission so in this opening statement I am focussing on the need for teachers to have the requisite skills, knowledge, understanding and competencies to meet the needs of all students in the classroom. Research is clear that the quality of teachers and their teaching are the most important factors in student outcomes. This is especially important for students with special educational needs.

One of the strengths of the current education system is that all teachers are required to be fully qualified and registered with the Teaching Council. However, initial teacher education, on its own, can be insufficient to properly prepare newly qualified teachers for some students with more complex needs. These students require qualified teachers who are trained and equipped with additional knowledge and skills necessary to meet their specific educational and care needs. The skills learned through initial teacher education and more general professional development need to be further refined and adapted to meet diverse, and sometimes very complex, needs.

For these reasons, the DES established the Special Education Support Service in 2003, the National Behaviour Support Service in 2006 and the National Educational Psychological Service in 1999. Last year, the SESS provided over 20,000 training days to over 18,000 teachers. However, through our research and consultation, we are aware that many principals and teachers still do not feel equipped to teach some students with more complex needs.

The NCSE is pleased that there have been recent developments which are aimed at improving the knowledge, skills and competencies of teachers in this area. These developments include the Teaching Council's framework for continuing professional development (CPD) with inclusion as a core learning area; the study of special education as a compulsory module in initial teacher education and the decision to establish one NCSE support service: incorporating the SESS, NBSS and the Visiting Teacher Service thereby reducing fragmentation across support services.

The issue of training and supports is much wider than teacher education. Students can benefit when all staff in schools and people with whom they interact have been trained in whole school approaches to inclusion.

For example, when the NCSE was preparing our policy advice to the Minister on the education of students with autism, the need for autism awareness training for bus drivers and supervisors was repeatedly raised as inadvertent actions on the bus to, or from, school can trigger anxiety and behaviour issues.

We are currently carrying out a review of the Special Needs Assistant scheme: a very significant support scheme costing €428m enabling SNAs to meet the care needs of some 30,000 students. The need to improve the effectiveness of these posts with the provision of general and bespoke training for SNAs has been raised as an issue of concern by many consulted, including school management, parents and SNAs themselves.

These are gaps in the current system as the focus to date has primarily been on improving teacher education. I am happy to answer any questions Committee members may have.