

Opening Statement for the Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Date: March 2024



Inclusion Ireland

The National Association for People
with an Intellectual Disability.

About Inclusion Ireland

Established in 1961, Inclusion Ireland is a national, rights-based advocacy organisation that works to promote the rights of people with an intellectual disability.

We work towards the full inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities by supporting people to have their voices heard and advocating for rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

The vision of Inclusion Ireland is that of people with an intellectual disability living and participating in the community with equal rights as citizens, to live the life of their choice to their fullest potential. Inclusion Ireland's work is underpinned by the values of Respect, Inclusion, Equality, Voice and Choice.

Opening Statement

Dear Chair and members of the Committee, let me first thank you for this opportunity to exchange with you on this key issue today. My name is Derval and I am the CEO of Inclusion Ireland. Inclusive education is a core pillar of our work at Inclusion Ireland. We believe that inclusive communities have their beginnings in education. Our vision is for a time when all children get to go to school together. This vision should not leave out any child; from those who require a small amount of support to access their rights to children who require intensive support.

The issue we are here to discuss today might be specific but it also shows a general level of disconnection between policy at department level and the real lived experience of disabled children and their families who are constantly fighting for the recognition of their rights.

The removal of the criteria “complex needs” from the allocation of additional resources to a school is not only a worry for the children and parents but also for schools. We contend that the content of this directive is not compliant with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ratified by Ireland in 2018, and also the manner in which it was communicated and relayed publicly is quite far removed from the disability motto “Nothing about us without us”. The state has an obligation to consult with the people most affected by policy positions and actions. In this instance, the state has failed to do that.

While the large increase in budget for “special education” in terms of SNAs, SETs are often presented at the national level by the government to positively present its action, it is important to note that the impact of this investment is not carefully reviewed, evaluated or monitored effectively. There is a mismatch between what is presented publicly and the real lived experience of children in our schools.

To these numbers and statistics, we often respond with the experience of families on the ground who face the consequences of the decision made at a policy level. The committee had the opportunity to see in our briefing document some of the findings of a survey led last week that gathered more than 1500 answers from families. It captures their reactions to the new allocation model suggested by the government.

The single biggest theme we found in all of our work was that of developing trust. Families need to trust their child will get the support they need in their local school. Schools need to trust that they will get the support they need in supporting all children in their community. The only way to build this trust is through developing a cross government plan for inclusive education where we can see the commitment of our leaders and evaluate our progress through improvements in the quality of the educational experience children receive.

A survey we published 2 weeks ago nearly got 500 responses from parents to share their child experience at school this year. Only 14% said that their child is thriving at school while 45% of children with support needs say that they are being failed by the educational system as they face multiple barriers to access their right to school. They either contend with a lack of appropriate supports at school, a reduced timetable, emotionally based school avoidance, other distressing experiences, or they are not attending school at all.

Today is an opportunity, through conversation on this specific issue, to look at the whole education model in Ireland and how many children, not only disabled children, feel excluded. The Policy advice from the National Council of Education gives us an opportunity to gather all stakeholders around the table and work to a transition towards an inclusive education model that is co-designed where children voices are front and central. This is about investing in our schools, investing in our children, and investing in a more inclusive Ireland.

I look forward to the discussion today that I see as a step towards this goal.

For further information, contact;
Guillaume Jacquinot Policy co-ordinator.
0860353888
guillaume@inclusionireland.ie