

**Opening Statement to Joint Oireachtas Petitions Committee – Mandatory Autism Training
Hearing - Adam Harris**

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators,

I want to thank the Committee for your invitation to address you in relation to the issue of mandatory autism training for teachers. This issue is one which has featured in every submission that AsIAM has made to the Department of Education and Skills over the past 5 years – whether we are discussing the need for additional autism classes, the SNA scheme, reduced timetables, better outcomes for autistic students or indeed children out of school the issue of teacher training cannot but be central. It is no surprise to us that this issue has been brought to the attention of this committee by concerned parents and we congratulate those who took the initiative to get this matter on your agenda here today.

By way of context, I am the Founder-CEO of AsIAM. AsIAM is Ireland's National Autism Charity. We are 5 years old this year and endeavour to bring about an autism-friendly Ireland – that is a society where every autistic person is respected and accepted “as they are” and has the opportunity to participate in every aspect of Irish life. Central to this aim is an inclusive education system which universally respects and values autistic students and their unique way of communicating, understanding and interacting with the world.

We are presently at something of a cross-roads in this regard. 86% of autistic students, enrolled in school, now attend a mainstream school. This is see change compared to what was the norm perhaps 20 years ago. Indeed, as a young child, I spent the first 3 years of my education in a special school due to a complete lack of support or knowledge of autism in the mainstream school system at the time. However, it is clear to us that while the quantity of children attending mainstream school has vastly increased, the quality of their experience is greatly varied and significant change is required to ensure that every autistic student has a positive, empowering school experience.

In order to meaningfully include autistic students there are numerous essential ingredients:

- 1) Schools must be adequately resourced to do this. This means that they must have access to the staff numbers, capitations and clinical expertise they require to universally include students
- 2) The environment of schools must be autism-friendly. When we consider accessibility we often think of wheelchair ramps and lifts however we often overlook the sensory needs of autistic students in busy, loud and often congested mainstream school environments. Indeed, even buildings presently being constructed lack autism-proofing in their design
- 3) School policies must be autism-proofed. Policies, for example, which deal with discipline, assessment and enrolment cannot remain the same as before autism inclusion in school – they must reflect the specific support needs of a cohort of students who may need to do things in a substantially different way in order to get through stressful school days

- 4) Everyone in a school community must be informed and respectful of autism this includes peers, parents, non-teaching staff and members of the Board of Management
- 5) Perhaps most critically, all teachers within a school must understand and accept their role in teaching students on the autism spectrum and must be able to access whatever training they need in order to provide a suitable education for these students.

I have outlined these different issues because it is right that we understand meeting the needs of autistic students as something of an eco-system as opposed to any one singular action. Whilst, we are here to specifically talk about teacher training today it is important we also acknowledge the need for the state to do more to support schools in delivering inclusive practise.

Chairperson, for those who may not be overly familiar with autism, it is perhaps useful to provide a short explanation of the condition and why, as a result students may need teachers to be further equipped to support them. Autism is a lifelong developmental condition which relates to how a person communicates and interacts with others and how they experience the world around them. In practical terms, this means that autistic students may communicate in a very different way to others – this might include using alternative communication systems as opposed to speech, understanding language very literally and not using facial expression or body language in the same way as other people. It means that how a student may see detail as opposed to the bigger picture or may not be able to “fill in the blanks” in social situations like other people can. It means that a student may perceive their environment very differently to others and this may lead to sensory overload and significant discomfort. When these issues are misunderstood, it is easy for break downs in communication, frustration or a lack of understanding to occur. Unfortunately, we very often take a deficit approach to autism when in actual fact if we accept that autistic people may need to do things differently we can unlock the potential of students who have a different insight to others and who often excel at areas they are most interested in. Bearing in mind 1 in 65 students in our education system have a diagnosis of autism and that autism itself is a vast spectrum with every single autistic person having different levels of needs and different challenges and strengths, it is easy to see that every teacher will encounter many autistic students in their career and will need to have the capacity to adjust their pedagogy and classroom environment accordingly.

Many teachers are already doing this. In ASIAm, we are inundated with requests from schools to access training and talks during Croke Park hours. The Middletown Centre for Autism is playing a vital role in providing a range of high quality, free training to teachers across the Island of Ireland and we are lucky to get to meet incredible teachers every week who, through their own initiative, have learnt about autism and played vital roles in ensuring their students can fully participate and succeed. However, ad hoc efforts like this are simply not enough.

The EPSEN Act, 2004 is not 15 years old. If we consider this in the context of a student’s journey through school – we are now seeing a generation age out of the system. It is regrettable that in that time very little has been done to ensure that every single teacher

knows and understands autism. It still does not constitute a compulsory element of initial teacher education. There is still no mandatory training for existing teachers. Indeed, many teachers assigned to autism classes have little to no training on the condition prior to taking up their post. This is simply a recipe for disaster- it places both students and teachers in an entirely unacceptable position.

I am sad to report that we hear weekly from students who have fallen out of school or are attending school irregularly and a key factor in these cases is teachers who are not equipped in meeting the needs of autistic students.

Chairperson, this must stop. I would like to make some practical recommendations to the committee today:

- 1) Initial Teacher Education – We believe autism training must form a compulsory requirement of Initial Teacher Education. This is in line with recommendations already made to the Department and Teaching Council by the National Council for Special Education. As I have explained, autism is in many respects “counter intuitive” as a result it requires teachers to have a discrete knowledge of the condition which in turn can improve their skills as a teacher overall. Mary Immaculate College, Thurles has taken the first steps in this direction. I would encourage the committee to learn more about their rationale for making this decision and to encourage all other ITE institutions to follow
- 2) CPD Programme – There is a need for a national programme of training for all teachers in autism, and other disabilities. We need to get beyond the concept of autism being the purview of any one teacher but rather the responsibility of every teacher in every school. We welcome that teacher unions have made similar calls and would urge the Department to commence a consultation with stakeholders on what such a training programme should include and how it should be conducted
- 3) Range of offering – It remains that a significant cohort of students who need autism classes or special school places cannot access them. Parental voice must be considered more in terms of school placement and teachers in special classes must have advanced training and significant experience. Government must increase the number of classes and schools available, particularly in light of the Minister’s powers in the School Admissions Bill. Autism Classes require stronger guidelines in terms of their staffing, practises and offering to ensure they meet the needs of the students that they are setup to serve.
- 4) Student voice – When we talk about training we must remember that the people best placed to provide insight into their access needs and strengths are autistic students themselves. In our work with young people, we have found that when a student is not consulted on how they are supported this reduces their self-esteem and their openness to accepting help. Student voice must be built into the individualised planning process for autism as “when you have met one autistic person, you have met one autistic person”
- 5) Finally, if I may, I would like to highlight a positive example of partnership between education stakeholders and our own organisation. AslAm, in partnership with the Joint Managerial Body and the Irish Primary Principals Network, has developed a reflective online tool for teachers and schools to explore their own practise

regarding autism. This will include 3 hours of free online training for every teacher in the country, aimed at a “whole school” level. We will pilot this programme with 200 schools in September. Very often schools and teachers are asked to be “autism-friendly” without a clear or fair picture of what this looks like. We hope this tool and training will help to make that clearer and attainable.

Teachers can massively improve the lives of autistic students. I know the teachers I had made such a difference in my life. The profession is already doing a lot but we must put in place supports and standards to ensure that inclusive practise is a universal reality in our education system.

Thank you for your time