



**Tithe an  
Oireachtais  
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**An Comhchoiste um Oideachas agus Scileanna**

**Tuarascáil maidir le soláthar Ranganna Neamhoird de  
chuid Speictream an Uathachais agus Ranganna  
Speisialta i scoileanna príomhchineáil**

**Deireadh Fómhair 2018**

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**Houses of the Oireachtas  
Joint Committee on Education and Skills  
Report on the provision of Autistic  
Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Special  
Classes in mainstream schools**

**October 2018**

**32/ES/14**





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## Chairman's Foreword

The education of our children is considered, by virtue of Article 42 of the Constitution, as key to them developing into active members of society and contributing to the common good.

This provision applies to all children and does not exclude any child on any grounds.

Therefore, when designing and funding an education system, the needs of all students must be considered to ensure that, insofar as is possible, nobody is or feels excluded.

There is a growing acceptance that providing classes with additional supports to cater for students with special needs in mainstream schools has a positive outcome for all those involved.

The Committee listed this topic on its Work Programme as one of particular importance and requiring examination.

As Chair of the Committee, I viewed our consideration of this topic as an ideal opportunity to hear evidence of the benefits of mainstreaming as well as any challenges or possible drawbacks directly from stakeholders.

On behalf of the Committee, I would like to thank the witnesses who appeared before it to assist us in our examination of this matter.

*Fiona O'Loughlin*

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Fiona O'Loughlin T.D.

Chairperson

October 2018





## Introduction

The Committee, when drafting its Annual Work Programme, identified the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State as a topic of particular interest and one which warranted further examination.

As a first step, the Committee invited written submissions from a number of stakeholders and based on these submissions, a number of those were invited to a public meeting on the matter which was held, on [21st November 2017](#).

In their contributions, the witnesses asserted that not only will the student benefit from being educated in a mainstream school but they also highlighted the positive impact for the entire school population and the wider community.

The evidence suggests that very few children move from special classes or schools to mainstream schools and therefore it is imperative that students who have been in mainstream education remain in mainstream education as it is in the best interest of the child.

The Committee concludes from its examination that, in the vast majority of cases, the provision of special classes in mainstream schools is the most beneficial for all concerned.

It also concludes that inclusion in education is not optional and that every student should have the opportunity of attending their local school, irrespective of their special educational needs.

The Committee makes a number of recommendations in this report, calling on the Minister for Education and Skills, the Department of Education and Skills and bodies under its aegis to take particular action. However, the Committee is aware that, in addition to implementing all recommendations in this report and the appropriate policies being in place, a change in the mindset, particularly among those within the school population and the wider community, is necessary in order to address the issues raised.

This report highlights the benefits special classes in mainstream schools can have and that they clearly outweigh any consideration relating to the image or prestige of a school. It is hoped that our report will ensure that the provision of and access to education is universally available to all children.

At this meeting on [21st November 2017](#) the Committee heard from the following witnesses:

Mr. Adam Harris, CEO	AsIAm
Ms. Lorraine Dempsey, Communication and Policy Officer	Special Needs Parents' Association
Ms. Breda Corr, General Secretary	National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)
Mr. Fergal Kelly	Catholic Primary School Management Association (CPSMA)
Mr. John Curtis, General Secretary	Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS)
Ms. Teresa Griffin, Chief Executive Officer	National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

## Summary of Recommendations

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills ensures that mainstream schools have sufficient supports and resources to enable them to provide the special classes needed without the need for the provisions of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016 being used.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills direct that an analysis of the educational, developmental, social and financial benefits of mainstreaming be undertaken to vindicate the rights of all children in gaining equal access to education.

The Committee recommends that Minister for Education and Skills collect data to identify any particular schools with lower than average number of special **classes to ensure that 'soft barriers' are not a contributing factor.**

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills monitor the enrolment processes used in schools to ensure that students with special needs face the same process as everyone else.

The Committee recommends that the provision of special classes in post-primary schools forms part of the forward planning process undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills.

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Skills reconsider the open plan design of modern schools which can be more challenging environments for those with autism.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills increase the number of funded postgraduate special education places in third-level colleges.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills ensure that the availability of therapists is examined to ensure that early and appropriate diagnosis is made.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills reintroduce the scheme of visiting therapists.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills allocate sufficient resources for the provision of a special needs co-ordinator to all post-primary schools, with designated times for duties.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills immediately issues an instruction prohibiting the use of isolation and/or restraint on a student.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills initiate a review of the provision of fully vetted bus escorts to ensure sufficient availability.

## Summary of Evidence

In the course of the public hearing, a number of points were raised. The following is a summary of the main points given in evidence to the Committee:

### Special classes in mainstream schools

Special classes in a mainstream school are established when a Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO) identifies a need and approaches all local **schools to establish which can accommodate the student's needs. Alternatively,** a school may identify a need itself and apply for sanction to establish a special class.

The Committee was told that there has been a significant shift towards educating autistic people and those with special needs in mainstream schools.

It was submitted to the Committee that mainstreaming is the best approach in ensuring that all children have equal access to education insofar as is possible. However, some witnesses expressed concerns that, while the societal mindset may have shifted, there are cases where some mainstream schools remain reluctant to establish special classes.

Sometimes schools simply cannot physically accommodate additional classes on site and/or there are worries about the ability to provide the appropriate level of service required. In other cases, there is a concern that the introduction of special classes could negatively impact on the status of that school on league tables.

These are matters which, ultimately, the patrons and boards of management of schools must address.

Witnesses before the Committee made reference to the fact that the Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016 provides that a school can be directed to establish a special class. However, they all expressed their preference that this provision would only be used as a last resort.

***Recommendation:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills ensures that mainstream schools have sufficient supports and resources to enable them to provide the special classes needed without the need for the provisions of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016 being used.

**Effects of mainstreaming**

In evidence, the Committee was told that educating students in special classes within mainstream schools can have a very positive effect not only on the particular student but on the entire student body, school population and ultimately the wider community.

The mainstreaming approach allows students with special needs to move along a continuum in education and integrate with their fellow students in a whole-school setting.

It should be the aim of all schools to include pupils with special needs in as many mainstream activities as possible. However, if the situation is found not to be right for the child, any review should be in favour of the child and not the school.

Some Members commented that they were aware of remarks by some school inspectors, almost as a criticism, regarding the high number of special classes in particular schools. Such comments are at odds with what should be the aim of all schools, are unacceptable and need to be challenged.

It was also submitted that research has found that students who enrol in special schools or classes rarely re-enrol full-time in mainstream education.

This highlights the importance of including special classes in mainstream schools as a way of removing stigma, inequality and any resulting disadvantage.

***Recommendation:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills direct that an analysis of the educational, developmental, social and financial benefits of mainstreaming be undertaken to vindicate the rights of all children in gaining equal access to education.

## Inclusion

The purpose of schools is to educate all children and the view that the enrolment of certain students as optional was identified a part of the problem.

The use of '**soft barriers**' is becoming more common and are subtle ways of excluding certain children from attendance at their chosen school.

**The Committee was told that an example of a 'soft barrier' is** where a parent seeks to enrol their child, who has particular needs, in their chosen school only to be told **that** "the school down the road is very good at that".

Concerns were expressed that such practices are increasing especially in competitive areas where league tables appear to be prioritised over the educational needs of children.

One witness stated that the media is partly responsible for contributing to the increased use of '**soft barriers**'. This claim was based on reports that the definition of a good school, is based solely on the number of students who progress to third-level education. **This, the witness said "is quite insulting to people who have disabilities."**

It was put to the Committee that students with special needs seeking a school place should face the same enrolment process as everyone else.

In other evidence, the Committee was told that some parents were calling for autism specific special schools. However, the point was made that this would be a move away from a model of inclusion. The point was also made that simply opening a special class did not cater for the needs of students unless the appropriate infrastructure and therapeutic supports were in place, as part of an overall inclusion framework.

### ***Recommendations:***

The Committee recommends that Minister for Education and Skills collect data to identify any particular schools with lower than average number of **special classes to ensure that 'soft barriers'** are not a contributing factor.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills monitor the enrolment processes used in schools to ensure that students with special needs face the same process as everyone else.

## Post-Primary education

While the provision of special classes in mainstream schools can present challenges at primary level, these challenges are more pronounced at post-primary level due to the multiplicity of classes which students must attend. For this reason, students who have attended special classes in mainstream schools at primary level may find that the model they are familiar with cannot be accommodated at post-primary level.

While the post-primary education system may not be structured to fully accommodate those with special needs, special classes should be available as an option to students should they need additional support.

It is essential that the mainstreaming model continues into post-primary schools to provide a continuum of support to allow the student to progress with their peers.

Facilitating students in continuing their post-primary education in a mainstream setting and not in a special school may address the problem whereby students who enroll in a special school rarely return full-time to mainstream education.

The Committee was told that the provision of special classes in post-primary schools is not part of the forward planning process undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills.

### ***Recommendations:***

The Committee recommends that the provision of special classes in post-primary schools forms part of the forward planning process undertaken by the Department of Education and Skills.

The Committee recommends that the Department of Education and Skills reconsider the open plan design of modern schools which can be more challenging environments for those with autism.

## Teacher Training

The witnesses informed the Committee that there is a significant lack of additional training for teachers in special education.

It appears from the evidence to the Committee that training is largely left to the school. As a result, many teachers do not wish to work in classes with special needs students and this job often falls to the newest teacher being assigned to teach in these classes.

It would be preferable to have whole-school training but, in order to achieve this, the school would need to be closed which is not easy, particularly in special education.

The other option is to obtain substitutes for those attending courses but this is particularly difficult due to the lack of available suitably qualified substitutes.

In addition, teachers wishing to attend courses funded by the Department of Education and Skills must be already teaching in special education.

There were calls for the Minister for Education and Skills to increase the number of funded postgraduate special education places in third level colleges.

Teachers should want and be facilitated to attend training to work with our children.

### ***Recommendation:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills increase the number of funded postgraduate special education places in third-level colleges.

## Diagnosis of condition/Therapeutic support

The Committee was told that there are significant delays in getting an assessment and diagnosis which may be due to a shortage of therapists being trained in the country.

Parents cannot enroll their child in a special class until they first obtain a diagnosis resulting in a delay for the child accessing education.

Previously, occupational and speech therapists came into schools but this was discontinued around 2006. This approach provided an environment where parents, teachers and therapists could meet each other and discuss the appropriate supports needed.

Members pointed out that, without the appropriate diagnosis and support, it would be practically impossible for a teacher in a special class or special school **to respond appropriately to a child's needs and understand their patterns of behaviour or triggers** when even their parents find the situation challenging. This is particularly important when dealing with autistic children. Autism is distinct from other disabilities in that it is sometimes counterintuitive and teaching techniques which might work for most students are the worst possible thing for a student on the autism spectrum.

Without a diagnosis, how is a teacher meant to help and progress that child?

***Recommendations:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills ensure that the availability of therapists is examined to ensure that early and appropriate diagnosis is made.

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills reintroduce the scheme of visiting therapists.

### Capitation/Resources

The level of the capitation grant needs to be reviewed to ensure that it is sufficient for the operation of the schools with the appropriate level of supports for all students.

The Committee was told that mainstream schools which provide special classes, are effectively operating two distinct schools with very different needs and challenges but must operate as a single entity without compromising the quality of education of all students.

To recognise the challenges this presents, it was put to the Committee that the increased costs for schools due to special class facilities merit an overall increase in the capitation for each pupil.

In addition, calls were made for the allocation of a "special needs co-ordinator" post of responsibility to all post-primary schools based on the existing

programme co-ordinator model of Persons of Responsibility (POR) with time for duties.

***Recommendation:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills allocate sufficient resources for the provision of a special needs co-ordinator to all post-primary schools, with designated times for duties.

### Isolation Rooms/ Restraint

The use of isolation rooms and restraint was raised in the course of this meeting. The Committee was told that isolation rooms were being used as a method of dealing with the particular behaviour of certain students.

The Committee was also told that restraint is being used to prevent autistic students from stimming. For a person with autism, stimming is an essential means of self-regulation and to prevent this can be very detrimental.

Members agreed that there can be no circumstances in schools where such practices are used and that these matters may warrant a more detailed examination by the Committee.

***Recommendation:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills immediately issue an instruction prohibiting the use of isolation and/or restraint on a student.

### Bus Escorts

The Committee was informed that bus escorts are an important aspect of ensuring that certain students have access to education.

However, there now appears to be a problem in securing bus escorts resulting in some students being unable to attend school for long periods or only sporadically when the parent took them to school.

***Recommendation:***

The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Skills initiate a review of the provision of fully vetted bus escorts to ensure sufficient availability.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### Committee Membership

Deputies: Thomas Byrne (FF)  
Kathleen Funchion (SF)  
Catherine Martin (GP)  
Tony McLoughlin (FG)  
Hildegarde Naughton (FG)  
**Fiona O’Loughlin (FF) [Chair]**  
**Jan O’Sullivan (Lab)**

Senators: Maria Byrne (FG)  
Robbie Gallagher (FF)  
Paul Gavan (SF)  
Lynn Ruane (Ind)

#### Notes:

1. Deputies nominated by the Dáil Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Dáil on 16 June 2016.
2. Senators nominated by the Seanad Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Seanad on 22 July 2016.
3. Deputies Carol Nolan, Ciaran Cannon, Joan Burton, and Jim Daly discharged and Deputies Kathleen Funchion, Tony McLoughlin, Jan **O’Sullivan**, and **Josepha Madigan** nominated to serve in their stead by the Twelfth Report of the Dáil Committee of Selection as agreed by Dáil

Éireann on 3 October 2017.

4. Senator Trevor Ó Clochartaigh resigned with effect from 27 February 2018.
5. Senator Paul Gavan nominated by the Seanad Committee of Selection and appointed by Order of the Seanad on 8 March 2018.
6. Deputy Josepha Madigan discharged and Deputy Hildegarde Naughton nominated to serve in her stead by the Twentieth Report of the Dáil Committee of Selection as agreed by Dáil Éireann on 1 May 2018.

## Appendix 2

### Orders of Reference

- (1) The Select Committee shall consider and report to the Dáil on—
  - (a) such aspects of the expenditure, administration and policy of a Government Department or Departments and associated public bodies as the Committee may select, and
  - (b) European Union matters within the remit of the relevant Department or Departments.
- (2) The Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order may be joined with a Select Committee appointed by Seanad Éireann for the purposes of the functions set out in this Standing Order, other than at paragraph (3), and to report thereon to both Houses of the Oireachtas.
- (3) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Select Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments, such—
  - (a) Bills,
  - (b) proposals contained in any motion, including any motion within the meaning of Standing Order 187,
  - (c) Estimates for Public Services, and
  - (d) other matters as shall be referred to the Select Committee by the Dáil, and
  - (e) Annual Output Statements including performance, efficiency and effectiveness in the use of public monies, and
  - (f) such Value for Money and Policy Reviews as the Select Committee may select.
- (4) The Joint Committee may consider the following matters in respect of the relevant Department or Departments and associated public bodies:
  - (a) matters of policy and governance for which the Minister is officially responsible,

- (b) public affairs administered by the Department,
  - (c) policy issues arising from Value for Money and Policy Reviews conducted or commissioned by the Department,
  - (d) Government policy and governance in respect of bodies under the aegis of the Department,
  - (e) policy and governance issues concerning bodies which are partly or wholly funded by the State or which are established or appointed by a member of the Government or the Oireachtas,
  - (f) the general scheme or draft heads of any Bill,
  - (g) any post-enactment report laid before either House or both Houses by a member of the Government or Minister of State on any Bill enacted by the Houses of the Oireachtas,
  - (h) statutory instruments, including those laid or laid in draft before either House or both Houses and those made under the European Communities Acts 1972 to 2009,
  - (i) strategy statements laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas pursuant to the Public Service Management Act 1997,
  - (j) annual reports or annual reports and accounts, required by law, and laid before either or both Houses of the Oireachtas, of the Department or bodies referred to in subparagraphs (d) and (e) and the overall performance and operational results, statements of strategy and corporate plans of such bodies, and
  - (k) such other matters as may be referred to it by the Dáil from time to time.
- (5) Without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (1), the Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order shall consider, in respect of the relevant Department or Departments—
- (a) EU draft legislative acts standing referred to the Select Committee under Standing Order 114, including the compliance of such acts with the principle of subsidiarity,
  - (b) other proposals for EU legislation and related policy issues,

- including programmes and guidelines prepared by the European Commission as a basis of possible legislative action,
- (c) non-legislative documents published by any EU institution in relation to EU policy matters, and
  - (d) matters listed for consideration on the agenda for meetings of the relevant EU Council of Ministers and the outcome of such meetings.
- (6) The Chairman of the Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, who shall be a member of Dáil Éireann, shall also be the Chairman of the Select Committee.
- (7) The following may attend meetings of the Select or Joint Committee appointed pursuant to this Standing Order, for the purposes of the functions set out in paragraph (5) and may take part in proceedings without having a right to vote or to move motions and amendments:
- (a) Members of the European Parliament elected from constituencies in Ireland, including Northern Ireland,
  - (b) Members of the Irish delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and
  - (c) at the invitation of the Committee, other Members of the European Parliament.

**b. Scope and Context of Activities of Committees (as derived from Standing Orders) [DSO 84; SSO 70]**

- (1) The Joint Committee may only consider such matters, engage in such activities, exercise such powers and discharge such functions as are specifically authorised under its orders of reference and under Standing Orders.
- (2) Such matters, activities, powers and functions shall be relevant to, and shall arise only in the context of, the preparation of a report to the Dáil and/or Seanad.
- (3) The Joint Committee shall not consider any matter which is being considered, or of which notice has been given of a proposal to consider,

by the Committee of Public Accounts pursuant to Standing Order 186 and/or the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993.

- (4) The Joint Committee shall refrain from inquiring into in public session or publishing confidential information regarding any matter if so requested, for stated reasons given in writing, by—
- a) a member of the Government or a Minister of State,
  - b) the principal office-holder of a body under the aegis of a Department or which is partly or wholly funded by the State or established or appointed by a member of the Government or by the Oireachtas:

Provided that the Chairman may appeal any such request made to the Ceann Comhairle / Cathaoirleach whose decision shall be final.

- (5) It shall be an instruction to all Select Committees to which Bills are referred that they shall ensure that not more than two Select Committees shall meet to consider a Bill on any given day, unless the Dáil, after due notice given by the Chairman of the Select Committee, waives this instruction on motion made by the Taoiseach pursuant to Dáil Standing Order 28. The Chairmen of Select Committees shall have responsibility for compliance with this instruction.

## **Appendix 3**

### **List of Stakeholders**

Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS)

Middletown Centre for Autism

#### **Teachers' Union of Ireland (TUI)**

Irish Society for Autism

Catholic Primary Schools Management Association (CPSMA)

Department of Education and Skills

#### **Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO)**

National Council for Special Education (NCSE)

National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education (NABMSE)

Health Service Executive (HSE)

#### **Special Needs Parents' Association (SPNA)**

AslAm

Appendix 4

# Submission by Stakeholders



## **JMB Submission on *'the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State'*.**

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### **Introduction**

The Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS) welcomes the invitation from the Oireachtas Committee to present a submission on *'the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State'*

### **Who we are**

The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) was founded in 1972 to represent the interests of all voluntary secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It is the main decision-making and negotiating body for the management authorities of almost 380 voluntary secondary schools. The JMB comprises two founding organisations: AMCSS, the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools and the ISA, the Irish School Heads' Association, representing the Protestant Schools in the State.

### **Framework of this Submission**

Our contribution to this topic will be under the following headings:

1. Background and context
2. Guiding principles
3. Special Education Class Provision

### **1. Background and Context**

The shared ethos of voluntary secondary schools of all denominations is founded on the Gospel values of Christ the Teacher who rejoiced in diversity and put those who were marginalised at the centre. Each school community thus reflects the spirit of a Christian family and voluntary secondary schools have always been extraordinarily inclusive while caring for those who are most vulnerable. The government policy of integrating young people challenged with special educational needs therefore sits well with the ethos of our schools

and the JMB has long been actively involved in both supporting and challenging the Department and its agencies in our mutual effort to enhance educational provision for all.

Young people get a single chance at education and the option of standing still in a changing landscape of understanding and new insight is not the way forward. School management is, as ever, open to engaging fully with the Department and NCSE on the continued roll-out and development of special class provision in our schools.

JMB, on behalf of its members and their school communities, has engaged fully with the all discussions, debates and consultations on special class provision to date. We work with DES, NCSE, SESS, NEPS, SEC and other agencies directly and also in collaboration with ACCS and ETBI within the Management Representative Group (MRG). In 2013, the JMB proposed a new model of allocating resources on the basis of school profiling, a stance subsequently developed further and submitted by MRG to NCSE and the Department. This proposal aligns with key aspects of the model eventually implemented and known as the ‘School Profile Model’.

The key parameters of the new model align with the values underpinning provision in voluntary secondary schools and have been frequently reiterated by JMB:

- Students with the greatest level of need require access to greater levels of support – resources follow the student
- Schools need resources to facilitate early intervention
- Schools require stability in terms of SEN staffing
- There must be flexibility in response to changing school profiles
- If a school’s educational profile is the basis for its resource allocation, it must be based on indicators that are equitable, transparent and appropriately weighted
- Schools need professionally-delivered support to develop their capacity to provide for SEN
- External oversight of the use of resources will be required to ensure equity and support best practice

Each of these parameters are amplified at the level of the special class. The publication of a number of advisory and guidance documents from NCSE, DES and NEPS has informed the engagement of schools in this area. These include:

- *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes for Boards of Management and Principals of Primary and Post-Primary Schools*
- *Student Support File: Guidelines*
- *Guidelines for Post-Primary Schools: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs in Mainstream Schools*
- *Understanding Special Class Provision in Ireland*
- *Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools*

Guidelines, however, only get a school so far. The national challenge of mainstreaming virtually every child and young person with special educational needs demands a serious

commitment to both infrastructure and human resourcing and, particularly in the area of therapeutic supports, this has yet to materialise.

JMB is therefore heartened to note the recent launch of a proposed model of support for students with additional care needs and looks forward to engaging with the Department and NCSE on its implementation.

## **2. Guiding Principles**

Whether in special or mainstream class settings, Special Education provision relies on three guiding principles. The first is that *'All students, irrespective of special educational need, are welcomed and enabled to enrol in their local schools'*.

As earlier discussed, voluntary secondary schools have, well in advance of any legislation or regulation, provided for the appropriate education of all their students, irrespective of their place on the continuum of human abilities and intelligences. It must nonetheless be acknowledged that the legitimate aspiration of 'including all' into mainstream school settings will, in certain circumstances, not be appropriate or in the best interests of the young person themselves. It is therefore incumbent on the primary educators – parents – and on the State as supporter of parents' Constitutional rights and responsibilities, to continue to make provision for education in special school settings of those young people for whom a mainstream school – even in a special class – cannot provide appropriate learning opportunities. It is acknowledged that neither intelligence nor physical/sensory capacities are fixed and that identification of those for whom a special setting is most appropriate can be problematic. The duty of care exercised by the management of a school, however, extends to *every* member of that community and the Departmental and statutory agencies concerned with educational provision of those with SEN must retain the good of the child as their core principle.

That said, voluntary secondary school management continues to welcome the establishment of special classes within our schools and JMB strongly affirms the provisions for designating special classes in schools under pending legislation and looks forward to engaging with the Department on the regulatory framework under which this provision will be made.

Meanwhile, the engagement of NCSE and the DES Planning and Building Unit around provision of special classes represents a productive and positive partnership with our schools and parents and JMB commends and supports such constructive interventions.

Secondly, *'Additional teaching supports are deployed and managed effectively by schools to support students with special educational needs, in line with their assessed learning needs'*.

JMB views three not-insurmountable challenges arising from this principle:

(a) The deployment of resources to support students with SEN requires considerable investment in relevant administration and coordination at school level. To date, no specific provision is made for this purpose and this must be addressed.

(b) Effective deployment requires resourcing, time, equipment and expertise. In particular, the professionalization of special education teaching, must be extended to a much wider cohort of teachers than has presently been achieved.

(c) The term ‘assessed learning needs’ has hitherto been associated with diagnosis-dependent resourcing but now requires to be determined by the school. For students with complex needs, the identification and addressing of such needs are themselves complex issues and must not be left to the school principal to manage without significant support and advice.

Finally, *‘A whole-school approach is adopted by schools to the education of students with special educational needs, including programme planning and the implementation of early intervention and prevention programmes’*.

Every policy emerging from the Department now contains and repeats the phrase ‘whole-school approach’. It is beyond argument that the role of the teacher brings with it wider responsibilities than subject teaching alone. It is equally beyond argument that our teachers have not been sufficiently professionally developed, resourced or given time for whole-school responsibilities in areas such as literacy, numeracy, anti-bullying, mental health, LGBT awareness, Traveller engagement, school development planning, school self-evaluation, new curriculum development, suicide awareness, differentiation, new teacher induction, student teacher development, assessment for learning, to name but a few. Simply including the phrase ‘whole-school approach’ does not mean such an aspiration will happen. If the State is serious about school-wide mediation of inclusion, it must be prepared to fund it. Mainstreaming, as a policy, is costly if it is to be effective and capacity deficits will not be resolved by rhetoric.

### **3. Special Education Class Provision**

Current policy requires that the identification of students with complex special educational needs is the responsibility of the school. A particular concern is the transfer of responsibility from a range of agencies and professionals to school management and the principal in particular. Hitherto, the principal has acted as an advocate for the SEN student and the family. Under this new model, the school identifies, allocates, reports and evaluates. Anxious parents now only have the principal as their port of call in terms of resource decision-making and the potential for contestation is obvious.

Maintaining records of baseline information, goals and progress and reporting on these to the resource provider, NCSE, represent fundamental good practice. An array of other administrative tasks associated with special classes include frequent meetings, reporting, assessment, coordination, planning, evaluation, crisis-management, scheduling, parent support, liaison with external agencies and primary schools, accountability measures, NEPS

requirements, SENO requirements, staff-development and pupil testing – all of which are also associated with best-practice but make extraordinary demands on already overwhelmed principals and special education teachers.

At a minimum therefore, JMB demands the Department allocates a Special Needs Coordinator post of responsibility to all post-primary schools based on the existing Programme Coordinator model of POR with time for duties. This would significantly enhance school-level capacity to comply with the new accountability measures comprehended by current policy as well as reducing the erosion of student-time for which the allocation of hours was made in the first instance.

### **Concluding Comments**

JMB has a strong record of robust engagement with the resourcing of special class provision at both school and system level. Inclusion represents a clear Gospel value for our schools but the State must equally ensure that its policy of ‘mainstreaming’ young people with SEN is resourced and supported. To this end, JMB has worked closely with the autism advocacy organisation *AsIAm* to jointly develop a set of resources which will support families and educators of young people with autism in our schools.

We will, of course, continue to work closely with our management colleagues across the sectors and with the Department and its agencies. The transition from current to future arrangements on additional care needs will require some years of high-level school-to-system communication and flexibility and the JMB recommends the establishment of a regularised and structured consultative framework between the Management Representative Group and the Department/NCSE.

**John Curtis, JMB General Secretary**

**June 2018**

**The Provision of ASD and Special Classes In  
Mainstream Schools Throughout The State**

**Submitted By: Middletown Centre for Autism**

**Ref: JCES4/C/1/C/11**



## **Written Submission to the Joint Committee on Education: Review of support and provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools by Middletown Centre for Autism.**

### **1. A Brief History & Statutory Background**

Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) began offering services to children and young people with autism, their parents and the education professionals who work with them in 2007, following the completion of a detailed Memorandum of Understanding agreed between the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) and the Department of Education and Skills (Ireland) in 2004 and the appointment of MCA's first Board of Directors and Chief Executive in 2007.

MCA is established as a company limited by guarantee. The Board of Directors comprises of 5 Department of Education and Skills nominees and 5 Department of Education appointees. MCA is a cross-border facility jointly funded by the Department of Education in Northern Ireland and the Department of Education and Skills in Ireland.

The original plans for MCA's development have been reviewed by officials from both departments and staff from MCA. At the North South Ministerial Council education meeting of 15 June 2012, the Council announced that there would be "a limited expansion of services delivered by MCA and the focus on ensuring a sustainable future for MCA". The expansion of services has been completed.

The creation of MCA reflects the commitment by the Department of Education and Department of Education and Skills to the development of services for those young people with more complex autism and long-term needs. Funding is provided equally by the two Departments to support MCA in the provision of specialist support and services not currently available to the education sector in either jurisdiction.

### **2. MCA Role and Purpose**

MCA was established as a specialist second level service provider to work in partnership with existing statutory and voluntary providers to develop and provide specialist autism services primarily in the education sectors. The Centre provides an integrated package of services, including a cohesive, trans-disciplinary learning support and assessment service combined with research and training services together with opportunities for family support and professional development.

As an all-Ireland facility, MCA offers specialist second level autism support services across home and school environments, as well as an extensive training programme aimed at parents and school staff in both jurisdictions. This work is underpinned by current research and MCA's own research, focusing on evidence based educational developments in autism. Additionally, MCA provide a suite of downloadable research bulletins, online learning modules and research based practical resources providing useful information for parents and young people with autism and effective professional development for education and health staff. Further specialised training and post-grad courses have also been secured through partnership with Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick and Stranmillis University College.

### **3. A Focus on Excellence**

Over the last decade, MCA has built a reputation for excellence in the quality of its services and this has been confirmed by independent joint inspections in 2012 and 2016: on both occasions MCA and its services were deemed to be outstanding. The inspectors concluded in 2016 that

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*“the Centre has developed provision and services in agreement with the Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Education, and there is evidence that in both jurisdictions they are impacting significantly on the education and life experiences of the referred pupils, their teachers and parents”.*

*Joint Inspection Report 2016*

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- *Children and young people with autism.*
- *Parents (and guardians) of children and young people on the autism spectrum. The Centre’s work with this group is provided within an educational context*
- *Professionals working in the autism sector, mainly those based in the education sector but including some health professionals who are school based.*

4. MCA has identified three core groups of clients for whom it develops and offers services to;

5. The three core services offered by the Centre: -

- *A Training and Advisory Service*
- *A Learning Support and Assessment Service*
- *A Research and Information Service*

## **6. Department of Education and Skills Policy Goals**

Together with the two funding Departments, MCA annually agrees a detailed business plan which reflects the educational priorities in each jurisdiction. The key targets which MCA must achieve are thus differentiated by jurisdiction; in Ireland the Centre focuses on delivering comprehensive training programmes to upskill parents and education professionals in primary, post primary, special schools, providing advanced post grad. courses in partnership with teacher training colleges and providing intensive autism support to a cohort of children referred to the Centre by officials from NEPS, NCSE, and DES.

The priorities and service delivery objectives detailed in MCA’s business plan are designed to fit within the framework of the Department of Education and Skills Action Plan for Education 2018.

## **7. MCA Service Delivery Priorities 2018 - 2019**

MCA in discussions with the Department of Education and Skills has identified the following priorities for service delivery in 2018 - 2019:

- An enhanced Research and Information service with a focus on providing independent expert advice, training and information and guidance to DES, education professionals, organisations and parents.
- MCA will work with the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to support it in achieving the outcomes detailed in its Statement of Strategy 2017-2021.
- MCA will work with the NCSE to implement the three recommendations detailed in NCSE Policy Advice NO. 5 “Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools”
  - The DES should assign responsibility to MCA for regularly and formally updating the list of evidence informed educational interventions for ASD.
  - MCA should be requested and funded to research, compile, maintain and update a list of technology (including software) shown to be effective in teaching students with ASD.
  - Training for parents by HSE and MCA, based on such programmes as the Early Bird and Early Bird Plus programmes, and the Incredible Years programme should be available to parents and families of children with ASD on a consistent basis nationally. Sibling workshops should also be consistently available, where indicated, to support siblings in understanding the nature of ASD.
- Further development and expansion of the current parent and professional training programme to include accredited undergraduate and post graduate courses at the University of Limerick, (Mary Immaculate College).
- The development of the Centre’s information services to include Online Learning services, online and phone advice and support service for parents and professionals.
- The continued development of a sustainable model of the current trans-disciplinary learning support service which could be implemented and integrated in to current education provision in Ireland. This service will be continued for the forthcoming year with a minimum of 12 children and young people per annum receiving direct learning support intervention.

#### 8. Detailed service delivery objectives by client group

Core Group	DES Action Plan Goals	The Centre’s Service Delivery Objectives
<b>Children and Young People</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improve the learning experience and the success of learners</li> <li>▪ Improve the progress of learners at risk of educational disadvantage or learners</li> </ul>	<p>MCA will assist referred children and young people with autism to maximise the benefit from their current educational placement through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ the provision of a trans-disciplinary assessment by the Learning Support and Assessment Service, currently in Ireland, for up to 12 Children per annum</li> <li>▪ the development and implementation of a Learning Support Plan (LSP) which will be reflected in a revised Educational Plan for the child or young person</li> <li>▪ supporting the development of an autism competent school environment through our whole school referral programme (currently in NI only)</li> <li>▪ improving the educational experience and outcome for children</li> </ul>

	with special educational needs.	and young people with autism in their current educational setting and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ linking with parents to enable them to support their child's school-based programmes at home</li> </ul>
<b>Parents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Build stronger bridges between education and the wider community</li> </ul>	<p>MCA will deliver second level autism support to parents in N Ireland and core training to parents in the Republic of Ireland by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ enabling parents to support their children's education</li> <li>▪ helping them manage their children's autism</li> <li>▪ increasing parents' knowledge of autism and how it impacts on their child</li> <li>▪ provision of education-based home support</li> <li>▪ provision of advice for the parents of children and young people referred to the LS&amp;A Service</li> <li>▪ access to autism literature and peer reviewed research</li> <li>▪ the provision of post diagnostic training, information and advice for parents in Ireland</li> <li>▪ provision of specialist led second level training to assist parents in the management of specific difficulties in the education of their child in the north</li> </ul>
<b>Professionals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Help those delivering education services to continually improve</li> <li>▪ Improve national planning and support services</li> </ul>	<p>MCA will continue to deliver second level specialist support services to front line professionals who work in education with children and young people with autism through</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Case study-based research programme, supporting the introduction of new research-based practice with the provision of resources, information and training to support classroom practice and the sharing of good practice</li> <li>▪ Research bulletins which distil current specialist research on autism to enable it to be effectively used within schools</li> <li>▪ supporting collaboration amongst teachers and the creation of learning communities of good practice</li> <li>▪ supporting the delivery of the learning support plan for children and young people referred to the Learning Support and Assessment Service (LS&amp;A)</li> <li>▪ the provision of specialist training for education professionals in partnership with the University of Limerick and Mary Immaculate college.</li> <li>▪ providing specific training for those professionals working with children and young people referred to the Learning Support and Assessment Service</li> <li>▪ the identification and development of needs led training programmes for educational professionals</li> <li>▪ developing and providing access to an autism specific research network</li> <li>▪ helping professionals reduce their dependency on external</li> </ul>

	<p>support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ helping schools to improve the capacity to meet the identified needs of children and young people with autism earlier and more effectively through learning and teaching</li> <li>▪ Supporting schools in developing essential leadership behaviours to develop good autism education provision.</li> </ul>
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## 9. Training

MCA provides a comprehensive range of professional and parental training programmes for education staff in Ireland such as:

- Five-week Pre-school programme
- Five-week Primary programme
- Five-week Post-Primary programme.
- Specialist commissioned training such as SNA training to support the transfer of AA schools to DES in 2011-2012.

### Graduate Certificate in Autism Studies

The Centre provides a graduate certificate in autism studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

- In 2017, 20 students graduated
- In 2018, 45 students will graduate.

The students on this course are a mixture of parents and educational professionals.

### In the last academic year 2017-2018

- 8,412 Professionals from RoI received training
- 3,581 Professionals from NI received training
- 3,262 Parents from RoI received training
- 1,282 Parents from NI received training

### Outcomes – since 2008

- 34,106 Professionals from RoI trained
- 26,853 Professionals from NI trained
- 23,318 Parents from RoI trained
- 6,586 Parents from NI trained

In total, since October 2010, 94,226 training places have been planned and offered to parents and professionals in Ireland. Appendix 1 provide a summary of schools and education establishments supported during the current 2017-2018 academic year.

## **10. Out comes to date in Ireland - Learning Support and Assessment**

The MCA Learning Support and Assessment Service (LSA) delivers intensive assessment and learning support for children and young people with autism, who despite specialist input, continue to experience difficulties in their educational setting. It is a second level service aiming to provide further assessment, learning support and intervention for children and young people with autism. The service utilises a trans-disciplinary approach to service delivery. The team includes Teachers, Occupational Therapists, Speech and Language Therapists, Autism Intervention Officers and Learning Support Officers. The service delivery is based on a capacity building model which provides:

- A detailed trans-disciplinary assessment and learning support plan
- Specific training for those working with the child and young person referred to the service
- Home support and advice for parents in relation to their child's education
- Support for children and young people for up to 10 months according to need

In 2009 the first young person was referred for MCA's intensive individualised intervention, since then, in the last academic year 2017-2018:

- 66 Children received 1:1 individual support from the Centre in Northern Ireland
- 17 Children received 1:1 individual support from the Centre in Ireland

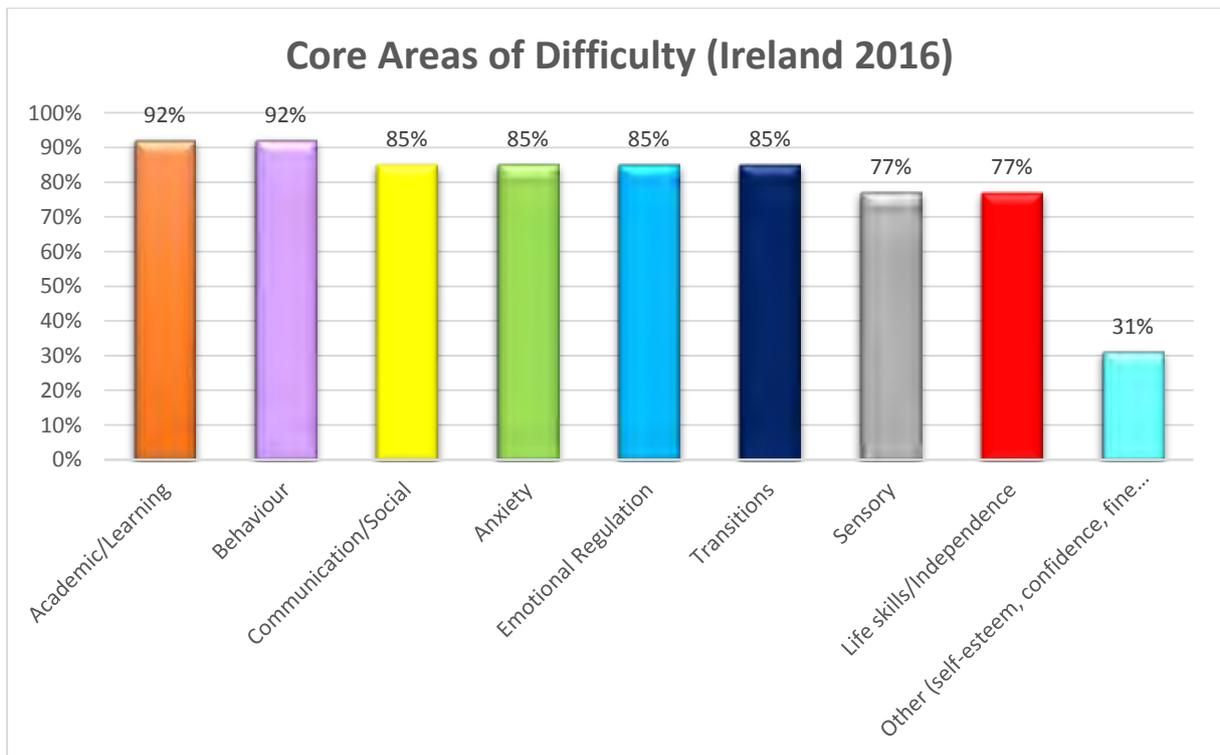
## **11. Outcomes - since October 2010**

- 55 Children currently receiving support (44 North, 11 South)
- 152 Children referred to date (110 North, 22 South)
- 1694 Children provided with direct support (1,234 North, 135 South)
- 1440 Children supported through whole school approach (1,376 North, 64 South)

The Centre has carried out research into the effectiveness of its Learning Support and Assessment programme for referred children from both N Ireland and Ireland over the period 2016 to 2018 and the key issues and outcomes are summarised below:

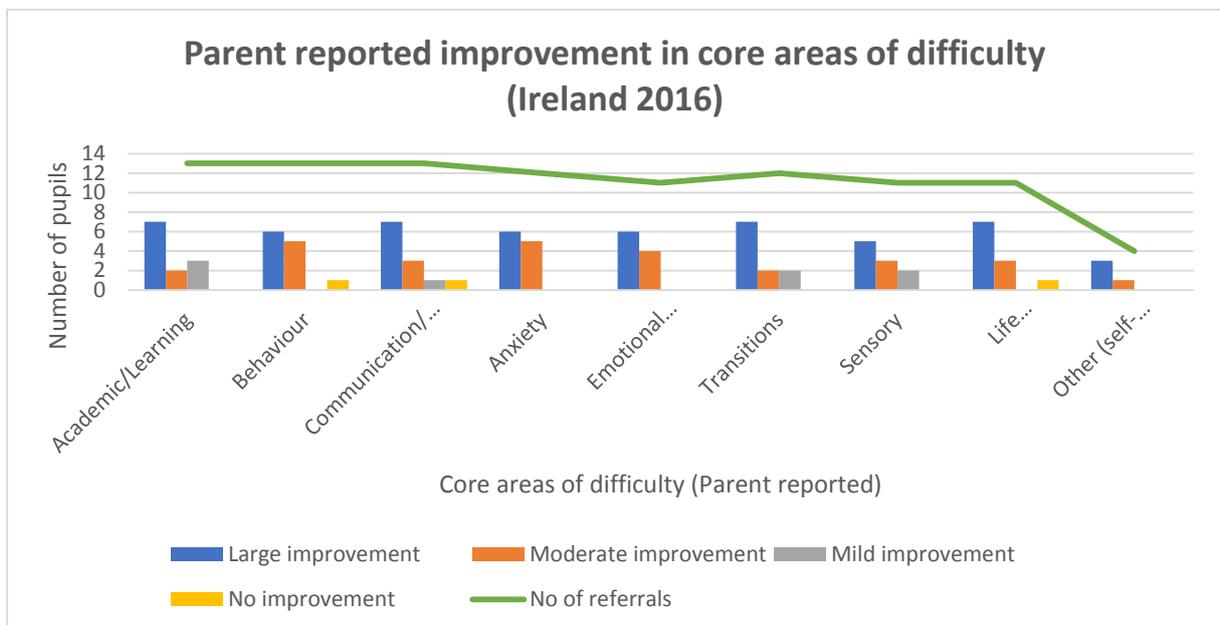
## **12. Primary areas of difficulty experienced by children with autism in 2016 in Ireland**

At the point of referral to MCA, the referral agent (DES, NEPS) highlighted the pupils' core areas of difficulty.



The most common core areas of difficulty at the time of referral to MCA were: academic/learning and behaviour (92%), communication/social, anxiety, emotional regulation, transitions (85% respectively) followed by sensory/life skills/independence (77% respectively). Almost one third (31%) presented with other difficulties including low self-esteem, confidence and fine motor skill deficits.

### 13. Level of improvement in reported core areas of difficulty (Parental report)

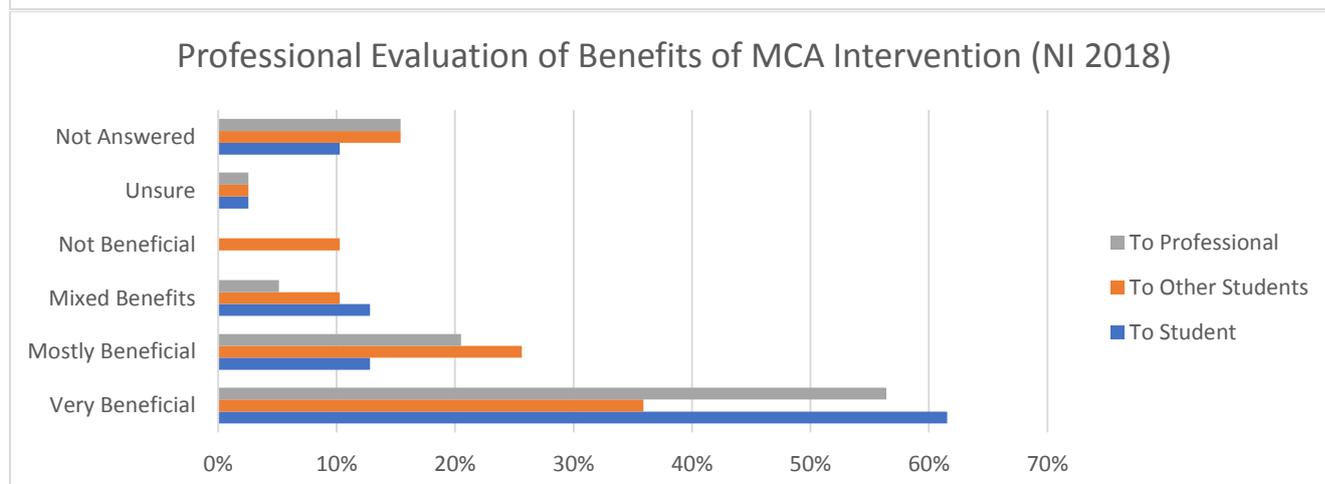
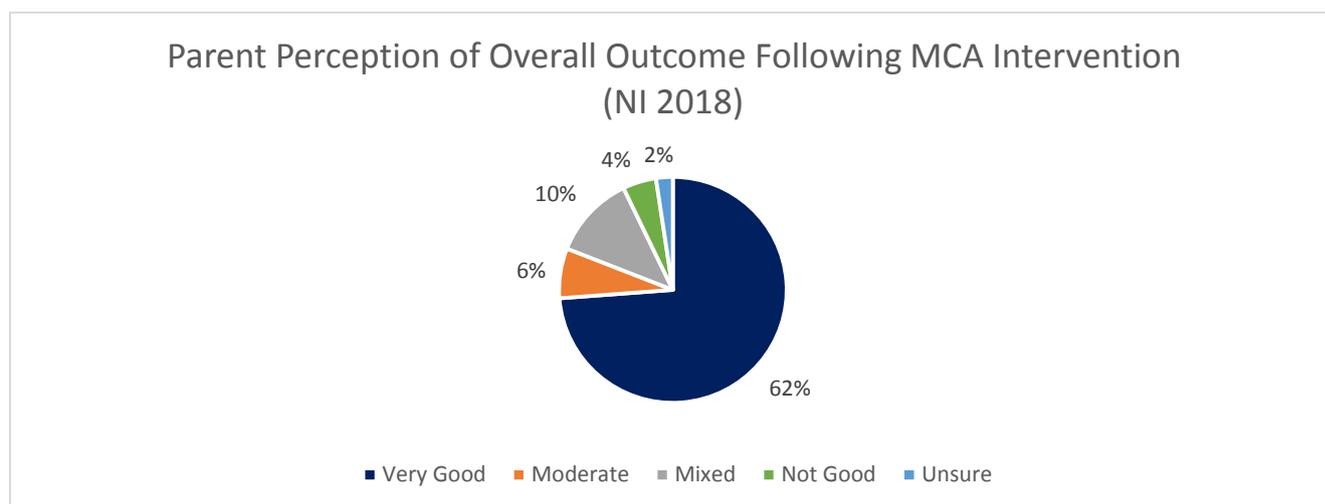


A review conducted by the Centre in 2016 found that over half (54%) of the parents of pupils referred to MCA, reported large improvements in all areas of core difficulty.

In 2018 the Centre's research team carried out a further assessment of the Learning Support and Assessment programme to determine its effectiveness in Northern Ireland.

The majority (82%) of key professionals in Northern Ireland (e.g. classroom teachers, assistants, SENCO’s) who worked with the pupil during the course of the MCA intervention, reported that the MCA intervention work was “very beneficial” for the pupil themselves, 55% felt that it was “very beneficial” for other pupils in the class and 68% felt that it was “very beneficial” for themselves as professionals in terms of learning new information and strategies related to autism.

At the end of intervention, most parents and professionals reported that overall, they had experienced a ‘very good’ (62% of parents) or very beneficial (to the student 62%; to professionals 56%) intervention process with MCA.



#### 14. Whole School Referral Programme

The Whole School programme’ is an extension of the LS&A individual child referral services provided by MCA in N Ireland. The programme’s core aims are to work strategically with Senior Leaders to promote a culture of autism awareness and to embed best autism practice across school development planning.

Training is provided to professionals and parents and the progress of a group of pupils is tracked to evaluate the impact of the programme. Support is provided on building the skill sets of staff and in sharing expertise across the school family.

The Joint DES-ETI inspection in 2016 noted that:

“The Centre has developed a highly effective whole school training and support model in addition to individual learning support and assessment, that involves observations of practice in the school, a

planned programme for regular staff and parental training sessions, and ongoing advice over three to four terms. This highly effective work raises whole school practice for autism and subsequent outcomes for the children and young people.”

### **15. Supporting the development of policy advice**

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) conducted a review of autism provision in Irish schools in 2015 and published the report in 2015. This report, which includes provision in Post-Primary schools reported seven broad principles for the Minister for Education to consider:

Middletown Centre worked with the research team to develop the quality framework that was the measuring instrument used in the research; the Centre also participated on the Steering Group overseeing the research.

### **16. Conclusion**

MCA, through its business plan agreed with DES, its partnerships and working arrangements with other education partners, is supporting the ongoing development and provision of autism focused education in special schools, in autism units and classes in mainstream schools and for children and young people with autism excluded from school-based education provision.

Inspection and research-based data has evidenced how the services provided by MCA continues to have a positive impact on individuals with autism referred to the Centre, their families and professionals involved with their education and development across the island of Ireland.

**Appendix 1 schools supported during the 2017- 2018 Academic year including details of specialist training provided.**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Venue</b>
Joint	Marion School, Bray, Wicklow
Joint	Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
Joint	Red Cow Moran Hotel, Dublin (Dr. Brian McClean Lecture)
Joint	Red Cow Moran Hotel, Dublin (Dr. Fiona Knott Lecture)
Joint	DCU Saint Patrick's Campus, Dublin
Joint	Kinsale Community School, Ballinacubby, Cork
Parent	An Droim Mor National School, Killygordon, Donegal
Parent	Bishop Murphy Memorial School, Fermoy, Cork
Parent	Catherine McAuley Junior School, New Ross, Wexford
Parent	ChildVision, Drumcondra, Dublin
Parent	Colaiste Iosagain, Kilmalogue, Portarlinton, Offaly
Parent	Convent of Mercy Girls National School, Cork
Parent	Convent of Mercy National School, Cavan
Parent	Kerry Intervention and Disability Services - Mid Kerry Network
Parent	Redeemer Boy's National School, Dundalk, Louth
Parent	Scoil Bhride Primary School, Edenderry, Offaly
Parent	Scoil Chormaic, Cashel, Tipperary
Parent	Scoil Eoin Phóil Naofa, Puttaghan, Tullamore, Offaly
Parent	Scoil Ghobnatan, Bellevue, Mallow, Cork
Parent	Scoil Iosaif Naofa, Ballyvaughan Road, Kinvara, Galway
Parent	Scoil Naomh Eltin Cionn tSaile, 10 Roseabbey Park, Cork
Parent	Scoil Ruain, Thurles, Tipperary
Parent	SICAP Education and Training Office, Killorglin, Kerry
Parent	St. Catherine's Special School, Newcastle, Wicklow
Parent	St. Cecilia's School, Rosses Point, Sligo
Parent	St. Edward's National School, Ballytivnan, Sligo
Parent	St. Finian's National School, Newcastle, Dublin
Parent	St. Ita's and St. Joseph's Special School, Balloonagh, Tralee, Kerry
Parent	St. Joseph's Junior National School, Carryduff, Antrim
Parent	St. Joseph's National School, Buaile Beag, Rathoon, Galway
Parent	St. Saviour's National School, Ballybeg, Waterford
Parent	St. Ultan's Primary School, Cherry Orchard Avenue, Dublin
Parent	Waterford Education Centre, Newtown Road, Waterford
Parent	Waterford University Hospital
Referral	Ballycanew National School, Co Wexford
Referral	Poulfur National School, Poulfur, Fethard-on-Sea, Wexford
Referral	Red Hill School, Patrickswell, Limerick
Referral	Coolmine Community School, Blanchardstown, Dublin
Referral	Setanta Special School, Stillorgan, Dublin
Referral	Newtown Secondary School, Waterford
Referral	Red Hill School, Patrickswell, Limerick
Referral	Ballycanew National School, Wexford
Professional	An Droim Mor National School, Killygordon, Donegal
Professional	Bishop Murphy Memorial School, Fermoy, Cork

Professional	Catherine McAuley Junior School, New Ross
Professional	Colaiste Iosagain, Kilmalogue, Portarlinton, Offaly
Professional	Convent of Mercy Girls National School, Cork
Professional	Convent of Mercy National School, Cavan
Professional	Kerry Intervention and Disability Services - Mid Kerry Network
Professional	Redeemer Boy's National School, Dundalk, Louth
Professional	Scoil Bhríde Primary School, Edenderry, Offaly
Professional	Scoil Chormaic, Cashel, Tipperary
Professional	Scoil Eoin Phoill Naofa, Tullamore, Offaly
Professional	Scoil Ghobnatan, Bellevue, Mallow, Cork
Professional	Scoil Iosaif Naofa, Kinvara, Galway
Professional	Scoil Naomh Eltín Cionn tSaile, 10 Roseabbey Park, Cork
Professional	Scoil Ruain, Killenaule, Thurles, Tipperary
Professional	SICAP Education and Training Office, Killorglin, Kerry
Professional	St. Catherine's Special School, Newcastle, Wicklow
Professional	St. Cecilia's School, Cregg, Rosser Point, Sligo
Professional	St. Edward's National School, Ballytivnan, Sligo
Professional	St. Finian's National School, Newcastle, Dublin
Professional	St. Ita's and St. Joseph's Special School, Balloonagh, Tralee, Kerry
Professional	St. Joseph's Junior National School, Carryduff, Antrim
Professional	St. Joseph's National School, Buaille Beag, Rathoon, Galway
Professional	St. Oliver's National School, Ballycasheen, Killarney, Kerry
Professional	St. Saviour's National School, Ballybeg, Waterford
Professional	St. Ultan's Primary School, Cherry Orchard Avenue, Dublin
Professional	St. Vincent's Special National School, Navan Road, Ashtown, Dublin
Professional	Castleblaney Wellness Centre, Monaghan
Professional	DCU, Early Childhood Studies Department, Dublin
Professional	IATSE Conference, St Patrick's College, Drumcondra
Professional	ISCPHM, Westbury Hotel, Dublin
Professional	Keep In Education and Training (KITE) Event, Dublin
Professional	NSCE (SESS) Training: Ballincollig Hotel, Cork
Professional	NSCE (SESS) Training: Sligo Education Centre, Sligo
Professional	Oriel Hotel Cork, Ballincollig, Co. Cork
Professional	SESS Training: Charleville Park Hotel, Cork
Professional	SESS Training: Dublin West Education Centre, Dublin
Professional	SESS Training: Hodson Bay Hotel, Athlone
Professional	SESS Training: Kilkenny Education Centre, Kilkenny
Professional	SESS Training: Louis Fitzgerald Hotel, Dublin
Professional	SESS Training: Maldron Hotel, Galway
Professional	St. Aidan's National School, Enniscorthy, Wexford
Professional	TUSLA Education Welfare, Dublin
Professional	Cavan Crystal Hotel, Cavan
Professional	SESS Training, Donegal
Professional	SESS Training: Charleville Park Hotel, Cork
Professional	St Angela's College, Sligo



## Teachers' Union of Ireland

### Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills regarding 'the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State' (June 2018)

#### Introduction

TUI represents teachers and lecturers (17,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools and the institutes of technology.

The TUI welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Committee in relation to **'the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State'**.

#### Background

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018; OECD, 2009; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nOg, 2017, Growing Up in Ireland, 2017, IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017) despite spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015). The rapidly improving economic situation (ESRI, 2017; OECD, 2017; IMF, 2017; EU Commission, 2017) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continue supporting students with ASD.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10-14 year olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DES (2012, 2017) suggests that the number of

students in the primary school system will rise by forty-nine thousand (516,460 to 565,696) from 2011 to 2019 and by almost one hundred thousand in second level from 2011 to 2025 (322,528 to 416,897). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time, money or personnel. NCSE (2014; 2018), Barnardos (2008) and Growing Up in Scotland (2012) all show that between a quarter and a fifth of all students in the school system have special needs. Recent research in Scotland (Times Education Supplement April 13<sup>th</sup> 2018) suggests that the proportion of students with additional support needs was 18% in 2012 and 27% in 2017. NCSE (2018) shows clearly that students with SEN are significantly more likely to attend ETB schools than other types of post-primary schools. Furthermore, the same report shows that a student with SEN is approximately one and a half times as likely to attend a DEIS school as a non-DEIS school.

DES data on enrolment patterns indicate that most schools enrol some students with SEN. However, close examination of all relevant data indicates that schools in the ETB and C&C sectors enrol, by far, the largest proportion of students with special needs, representing a vast range in terms of the type and level of need experienced by individual students. Consequently, this leads to considerable variation in the additional support required by individual students and schools in order that special needs be addressed effectively and in a manner that ensures all students are appropriately supported in achieving their potential.

According to the Special Education Support Service (SESS), “ASD is a neurological, developmental disorder which affects how people with ASD communicate, socialise and interact with others. It is also characterised by restrictive, repetitive behaviours, interests and activities”. NCSE (2016: 4) states that

“Some 14,000 students (1.55% of all students) in Irish schools have been diagnosed with ASD. While this is an increased prevalence rate when compared with previous Irish studies, it is in line with recent prevalence rates in other countries such as the US and UK.”

Cosgrove et al. (2014) finds that boys are significantly more likely to experience ASD than girls, and children with ASD are more likely to live in urban areas than rural areas. NCSE (2015) also found a gender imbalance in ASD.

Bond et al. (2016: 1) found that

“ASD is a high profile diagnosis, and interventions for people with ASD represent a controversial area that attracts considerable scrutiny and debate. Since 2005, ASD has been classified as a low incidence disability in Ireland, and students with this diagnosis in mainstream schools are eligible for additional resource teaching hours and may also receive access to support from a special needs assistant (SNA). Students may also be educated in a special class in a mainstream school or in special schools with reduced pupil–teacher ratios and support from SNAs...The number of children identified with ASD in schools in Ireland has continued to grow steadily. Data provided by NCSE indicate that in 2011–12 there were 8,829 students with ASD in the total school population and in 2012–13 this number had increased to 10,719. The majority of these children attended mainstream schools.”

As outlined by McCoy et al., (2014: 6),

“Sixty per cent of primary special classes are designated as ASD classes, representing the dominant form of provision for students with such needs, particularly in recent years. Such classes are also typically highly specialised in terms of the types of need (special educational needs classification) of the students and in the range of year groups in the class.

At post-primary, ASD classes account for less than one-fifth of special classes, with much greater diversity in special class designation than at primary. Many post-primary special classes, and particularly those with no specific special educational needs designation, encompass the widest range of different special educational needs groups.”

McCoy et al. (2014: 18) also states that

“Despite the policy emphasis towards full inclusion, some experts continue to argue for special units and classes for students with particular disabilities, for example, students with learning disabilities, those with ASD and students with profound sensory impairment (Swanson and Hoskyn cited in Mitchell, 2010, p149). Other studies have highlighted how the special class can facilitate inclusion, particularly where students are moving from special school settings. Travers (2009) suggests that the option of part-time placement in a special

class may, for some students, provide the educational crutch that ensures they remain in a mainstream school. The unit of inclusion can therefore be viewed as the school and not the mainstream class (Norwich and Kelly, 2004 cited in Travers, 2009).”

Daly et al. (2016: 25) found that

“Current educational provision for students with ASD comprises a continuum of provision at pre-primary, primary and post-primary levels. Provision includes 19 dedicated special schools for students with ASD, 95 special classes at pre-primary level, 378 special classes at primary and 152 special classes at post-primary. There are also special classes for students with ASD in special schools. Staffing is allocated to special schools on the basis of the school’s student profile. Special schools are provided with the autonomy to organise class groupings in accordance with the curricular requirements of students...Where a student with ASD is included in a mainstream school, an additional 4.25 hours of resource teaching may be provided to support the student’s education placement (NCSE, 2015b). Where required, SNA support is also provided to support students’ educational placement as is assistive technology and/or specialist equipment. In the 2014-15 school year, there were 8,739 students with ASD included in mainstream classes at primary and post-primary levels (DES, 2015a).”

Children experiencing ASD also face other challenges. For example, Cosgrove et al. (2014) found that parents of children with ASD have particularly low educational expectations for them.

A commitment to implementing the EPSEN Act 2004 is essential if provision for students with special educational needs is to be adequately and appropriately addressed. However, full implementation will only be possible when sufficient resources are allocated to primary and post-primary schools. Over ten years ago, TUI (2006) emphasised that schools were not sufficiently resourced to implement specific elements of the EPSEN Act, in particular designing and delivering Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for SEN students. In the absence of adequate resourcing, many of the needs of students with special educational needs are falling on

parents, as seen in Scotland. Failure to meet the needs of children can, as noted by the charity Action for Sick Children Scotland, result in students missing up to a year in school (Times Education Supplement Scotland, August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

Recent cuts in educational supports, such as middle management posts and ex-quota guidance services, compounded the difficulties experienced by students with SEN as these students also rely heavily on support services from the health sector. Many of these support services are vital if a student with special needs is to be adequately supported. For example, in 2015, less than half of the recommended 127 specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) teams had been established, 472 children in care did not have a social worker, 673 children in care did not have a care plan whilst there are 8,161 child protection cases which had not been allocated a social worker including 2,829 deemed 'high priority' (Children's Rights Alliance, 2015). Furthermore, in a study of 33 countries, Ireland had the seventh highest ratio of students to school psychologists i.e. 5,298:1 as opposed to 927:1 in Denmark for example (Jimerson et al., 2009). The average in the study was 3,709:1. For Ireland to reach a reasonable rate of 2500 students per psychologist, taking into account demographic group, would require the employment of 267 more psychologists by 2021 (Impact, 2015). In 2017, there were 2,767 children waiting for a first appointment with CAMHS whilst Ireland has the fourth highest incidence of teenage suicide in the European Union (Children's Rights Alliance, 2018). This is all within the context that during 2014, the then TUSLA Chief Executive publicly stated that the Agency required additional funding of €45 million 'just to stand still' (Irish Times December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014). Indeed, TUSLA (2018) stated that

"While additional funding has been agreed for 2018, significant additional funding will be required for 2019 and 2020 to continue to grow Tusla as a self-sufficient organisation. It will also be important to be able to continue to respond to new Government policy and legislative requirements as they emerge."

Many of the above difficulties also arise when schools are trying to support a child in accessing speech and language therapy for example (Irish Examiner, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014). Children's

Rights Alliance (2018) highlights the 314 children who have been waiting over one year for a speech and language therapy assessment. It is interesting to note that Finnish schools have access to a school psychologist, school social worker, study counsellor, school dentist, school nurse, speech therapist and family counsellor. All of these specialists are either based in one school or, in areas where schools are smaller (over 30 percent of Finnish schools have only three or four permanent teachers), they split their time between several schools. “The multi-disciplinary group known as the child welfare team is a cornerstone of Finnish education, and it is a legal requirement to have one in every school. In big schools, this group must meet weekly for a two-hour meeting.” (Crehan, 2016: 28)

In 2018, schools are in receipt of far fewer resources as a consequence of austerity measures since 2008. Most pertinently, the moratorium on posts of responsibility has diminished capacity to establish special needs departments or otherwise plan and co-ordinate related activity in most schools. In addition, a worrying level of casualisation has emerged and the expertise of many teachers with particular qualifications and training in special education is lost as schools cannot deploy staff to best effect. Furthermore, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has removed the allowance payable to teachers who hold a Postgraduate Diploma in Special Educational Needs and participate in the planning and delivery of teaching supports to students with SEN. It’s difficult to see how the Government values the work of teachers who have pursued a qualification in SEN when the Government has removed the allowance for that qualification.

It is interesting to note that NCSE (2016) found that:

- Students with ASD are generally supported well in schools and the right supports are in place for them.
- Students’ experience of education is generally positive, particularly in primary schools – there is scope for further development in post-primary schools.
- Substantial resources are in place – every year about €300 million is spent on additional supports for students with ASD.
- The range and quality of school placements have improved:

- 86% of students with ASD are enrolled in mainstream schools of which:
  - 63% attend mainstream classes;
  - 23% attend special classes in mainstream schools;
  - 14% attend special schools;
- Almost 950 special classes are in place for students with ASD between mainstream and special schools – up from 77 such classes in 2001.
- 2,500 additional teachers are in schools specifically to support students with ASD.
- Teachers are more knowledgeable about ASD and its impact on students' learning.

Furthermore, Banks et al. (2016: 91) found that

“there was a strong emphasis on developing life skills in the majority of ASD classes with many students making progress over time in these areas. There was little evidence of stigma attached to attending ASD classes, even at post-primary where students were older and perhaps more aware of being educated separately. At both primary and post-primary, the main area of concern for students in ASD classes was around transitions, either to post-primary school among primary students or from school to senior cycle, further education or the labour market (or sheltered employment) among post-primary students.”

### **Recommendations**

In the interest of students, the TUI supports the full implementation of the EPSEN Act 2004 and embraces the core concepts of integration, inclusion, early intervention, individualised planning and monitoring of progress. It is regrettable that implementation of the EPSEN Act was never fully funded and hence couldn't be carried out. In recent years legal issues have arisen which raise questions as to whether the EPSEN Act can ever fully be implemented. The TUI would like to see these legal and financial issues resolved so that all students with SEN can be fully supported in the education system.

NCSE (2015: 25) found that

“With a prevalence of 1.55 per cent, ASD is no longer a low-incidence special educational category. A school with 600 boys enrolled might expect around seven to have ASD. A similar sized girls' school might expect around two with ASD. Many schools have fully embraced an

open and inclusive policy but we know, from our own experience and through consultations, that some are reluctant to recognise their role in providing a full continuum of provision for students with ASD. Both soft and hard barriers to enrolment remain... Despite the growth and corresponding improvement in educational provision for students with ASD, the availability of appropriate mainstream and special placements continues to be problematic in certain areas of the State, particularly for those with ASD who have more complex learning and/or behavioural difficulties.” The TUI strongly believes that special classes should be available, in a local school, to all students who require such provision. Neither hard nor soft barriers to admission should prevent a student with ASD from accessing suitable educational provision locally. A recent news report (Irish Times June 4<sup>th</sup> 2018) noted significant disparities in the availability of ASD classes in post-primary. Some areas and sectors were very well-served whilst other weren’t.

Schools need to be supported to ensure that students can access special classes locally if they need to. Hence training opportunities should be available, in school time and at employer expense, to all teachers who wish to access them. Those teachers who have acquired additional postgraduate qualifications in special needs education should receive the relevant additional allowance for same. It is also essential that schools can access advice, as and when needed, from agencies such as the NCSE, NBSS/ISS, SESS, NEPS etc. Despite the best efforts of all involved, many of these agencies have found themselves under resourcing pressure recently.

### **Conclusion**

Data clearly shows that students with SEN, including ASD, are far more likely to attend ETB and C&C schools than voluntary secondary schools. The TUI believes that all students should be able to access mainstream schools unless the needs of the students are so serious that they couldn’t cope in a mainstream school. The TUI believes that inclusive education is essential but that inclusion must be supported by the resourcing of schools but also the resourcing of support services. Staff who pursue additional qualifications must be recompensed. The role of the teacher is to support the education of the child whilst the SNA (if applicable) can cater to the care needs of the child (Circular 30/14 and the May 2018 NCSE review of SNA scheme). All schools should accept students regardless of the origins of the

child. Schools can be supported in doing so through the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016. Whilst most discussion about the Bill has been about the 'baptism barrier' and quotas relating to children of former students, less note has been made of the important power in the Bill that would allow the NCSE to require schools to take students with SEN. This should lead to a more level playing field for students in ASD in particular. Recent changes in guidance provision (Circular 12/2017) and middle management posts (Circular 3/2018) also are a very small step in supporting students with SEN. However, a much larger move in terms of restoration of both is also needed.

Ends

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## **Glossary**

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CSO	Central Statistics Office
C&C	Community and Comprehensive
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ETB	Education and Training Board
EU	European Union
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004
IEP	Individual Education Plan
ISS	Inclusion Support Service
NBSS	National Behaviour Support Service
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SESS	Special Education Support Service
SNA	Special Needs Assistant (in future to be called Inclusion Support Assistants)
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland

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**Submission in relation to the provision of ASD and Special Classes in Mainstream schools throughout the State.**

The Irish Society for Autism is a national organisation that was established in 1963. Providing information and support services for people with Autism and their families, promoting Autism nationally and internationally, provision of Autism Awareness training.

In addition to this we were instrumental in the development of the European Charter of Rights for People with Autism, are founding members of Autism Europe, are founding members of the World Autism Organisation and were members of the Educational Task Force on Autism.

Over the course of our interactions with parents of children with Autism in the school system we have encountered the following areas which appear to posing problems:

1. The apparent disparagement between the numbers of children in a special classroom and the number of children which can avail of the same support in post primary. It is difficult to ascertain exact numbers in order to corroborate this. However at a very basic level the numbers of ASD classrooms suggests that there are more than double the amount of special classrooms in primary schools compared to post primary schools. It can be assumed that all children with Autism will require the same supports in the post primary school, some may require less but other may require more to cope with the new environment. These resources should be available on a needs basis.
2. Principals refusing on various grounds to establish an ASD classroom in their school.
3. The appearance of “soft refusals” from schools, where a school may use apparently equitable rules to refuse to provide a service for a child with Autism. In some instances this will be entirely justifiable given their current resources. However this should be remedied.
4. With the introduction of increased data protection it may now be more difficult for the SENOs to verify who is on a waiting list for an ASD placement and children are moving off the list into placement.
5. As parents need to apply to each school individually this can place increased stress and administrative burden on the parents and children.
6. The normal catchment area criteria utilised by some schools does not seem to apply to children with ASD.
7. When a new ASD classroom needs to be constructed this can be an extremely lengthy process.

The availability of appropriate education for a person with Autism can have a dramatic effect on the quality of their life and that of their family.



**CPSMA submission in relation to the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State.**

**Introduction**

1. CPSMA thanks the Committee on Education and Skills for its decision to consider the matter of the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools and for the opportunity to provide input to its deliberations.
2. CPSMA wish to thank our member schools and principals who responded swiftly to provide input for this submission at such a busy time of year. The speed and scale of the response is a testament to the importance of this issue to principals.

**Report on CPSMA survey for principals of mainstream schools with special class(es)**

3. CPSMA conducted a survey for principals of mainstream schools with special class(es). The survey was circulated to member schools in the evening of Friday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2018 and closed on the morning of Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018. The survey was held across the bank holiday weekend and was therefore, open for only one working day.
  - There were 164 respondents.
  - 20% of the respondents were teaching principals and 80% were administrative principals.
  - 65.24% of respondents indicated that there is a waiting list for places in their special class(es) whereas 34.76% of respondents indicated that there is not a waiting list for places in their special class(es).
  - 63.41% of respondents stated that they would recommend opening a special class to a colleague. 36.59% of respondents stated that they would not recommend opening a special class to a colleague.
4. Several concerns were highlighted by respondents to this survey, including:
  - Managing challenging behaviour
  - Difficulty accessing appropriate training for teachers and SNAs
  - Difficulty accessing external supports such as Occupational Therapy, NEPS, Speech and Language Therapy
  - Increased workload on principals, particularly teaching principals.
5. In addition to the survey, CPSMA consulted with a number of senior principals with experience in the area of special classes for their input.

## **Opportunities and challenges of a special class attached to a mainstream school, as identified by principals**

6. More special classes in local schools would mean that pupils from those areas would be able to access an appropriate educational placement in their community and not have to travel long distances to access these placements in larger, usually urban, schools. This is true inclusion on a societal level.
7. For a teaching principal, the challenge is having to manage, what are in effect, two separate schools with very different needs, challenges and expectations under the one roof and make them all gel together to make one successful educational facility, while teaching full-time at the same time.
8. Behaviour management issues can be more challenging in special classes and principals are regularly called to become involved in these. For teaching principals, this means that they can be regularly called out of class to become involved in managing behaviour issues.
9. Significant management and time spent dealing with and professionals who deal with pupils in the special class: SENOs, OTs, psychologists, speech therapists, psychiatrists, play therapists, CAMHS etc.
10. There tends to be a need for increased communication between the school and parents of pupils in special class(es).
11. The principal is managing a much larger staff than that which is illustrated on their official designation from the Department of Education and Skills. Extra ancillary staff associated with a special class (SNAs, bus escorts) all must be managed by principal. Appointments, sudden absences, planned leave, replacement staff, Garda vetting etc. of these extra staff all falls to the principal. Managing transport issues to and from the special class are particularly demanding on the principal, especially at the start of the new school year as new routes are being established.
12. Creating and maintaining an appropriate physical environment for pupils that meets their particular sensory needs is very time-consuming. Establishing a Sensory Room, sourcing and purchasing appropriate educational equipment/technology, liaising with Occupational Therapists to gauge appropriateness of materials and over-seeing installation/maintenance/replacement of these takes time.
13. Increased administration is a feature of having a special class. Policies dealing with allocation of places in the class, IEPs, liaison with Bus Eireann, DES, bus escort reconciliations, payroll of bus escorts, letters to/from professionals, organisation of July Programme in the school, paperwork around transition to and from the special classes by pupils either to the next stage in their education or to another setting as appropriate etc. place a significant burden on principals.

14. Significant continuous professional development is needed for the staff of the school, both at set-up stage and on an ongoing basis – assessing this, planning around it, liaising with SESS and other providers and managing the practicalities of organising speakers, substitution and paperwork a challenge for principal.
15. The extra workload issues associated with being a teaching principal with special classes are not taken into account when calculating administration days for the year. One teaching principal currently has 15 administration days in the year to run both mainstream and two special classes.

#### **Amendment to Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016**

16. CPSMA argue that the recently passed *Amendment to Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016*, which gives the Minister for Education and Skills the power to compel a school to open a special class or classes where the National Council for Special Education has identified a need for such provision within an area, is not as necessary in the primary sector. It is acknowledged by principals of mainstream schools with special classes that their special classes have a positive impact on inclusion within the school. However, a number of concerns have been raised by our member schools regarding provision of training, management of challenging behaviour, difficulty accessing external support and increased workload on principals.
17. Addressing these concerns would encourage more schools to willingly open special classes. This argument is succinctly put by one of our principals who states:

I believe our school is a very good example of how pupils with ASD are successfully included holistically in school life. In 31 years of teaching, I believe setting up this unit was my greatest achievement. I am very proud of our school in its entirety and I believe we have all benefitted enormously from becoming a school that has an ASD unit. Our school community agrees. *However, it created a huge body of work for me that has overwhelmed me more than once. The workload is not sustainable and the personal toll it takes on the principal is, at best, unfair.* I believe schools like ours who agree to open special classes should be better supported and more schools would subsequently opt in as a result.

#### **Recommendations:**

18. Special classes are a positive addition to a primary school. Our member schools strive to ensure that all pupils in their schools are provided with equality of access. Given the increasing workload which this place upon principals and Boards of Management, CPSMA believe that serious consideration should be given to ensuring that every principal with a special class will automatically become an administrative principal.
19. Schools should, whenever possible, be encouraged and supported to establish special class(es), rather than compelled.
20. Adequate continuous professional development for teachers and SNAs working in mainstream schools with special classes must be made available on a whole-school basis.

21. CPSMA welcome the updated circulars, released by the Department of Education and Skills, relating to Assaults on Teachers and Assaults on SNAs. We call for a national, Department of Education and Skills' approved approach to dealing with challenging behaviour within special classes and whole-school training for such an approach.
22. The current system of management of bus escorts sees the Department provide a grant to individual schools, from which each bus escort is paid. We now call for bus escorts to be paid centrally, by the Department of Education and Skills, in a similar manner to SNAs.
23. Consideration should be given to ensure a fair geographical dispersion of special classes, thereby ensuring equality of access for pupils.

## Appendix 1

### Results of CPSMA survey for principals of mainstream schools with special classes

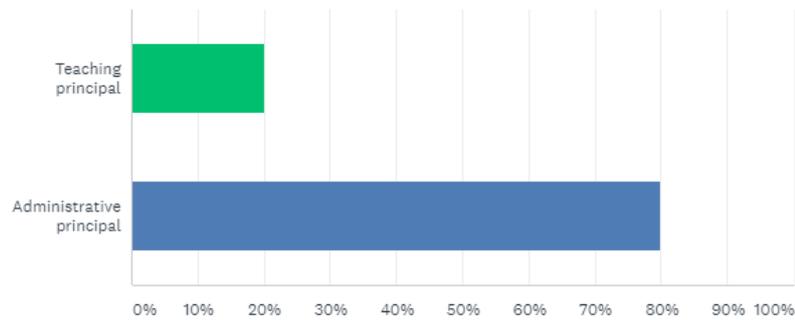
Survey was circulated to member schools in the evening of Friday 1<sup>st</sup> June 2018 and closed on the morning of Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> June 2018. The survey was held across the bank holiday weekend and was open for only one working day.

There were 164 respondents.

#### Question 2

Are you a teaching or administrative principal?

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Teaching principal	20.12% 33
Administrative principal	79.88% 131
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>164</b>

33 of the respondents were teaching principals.

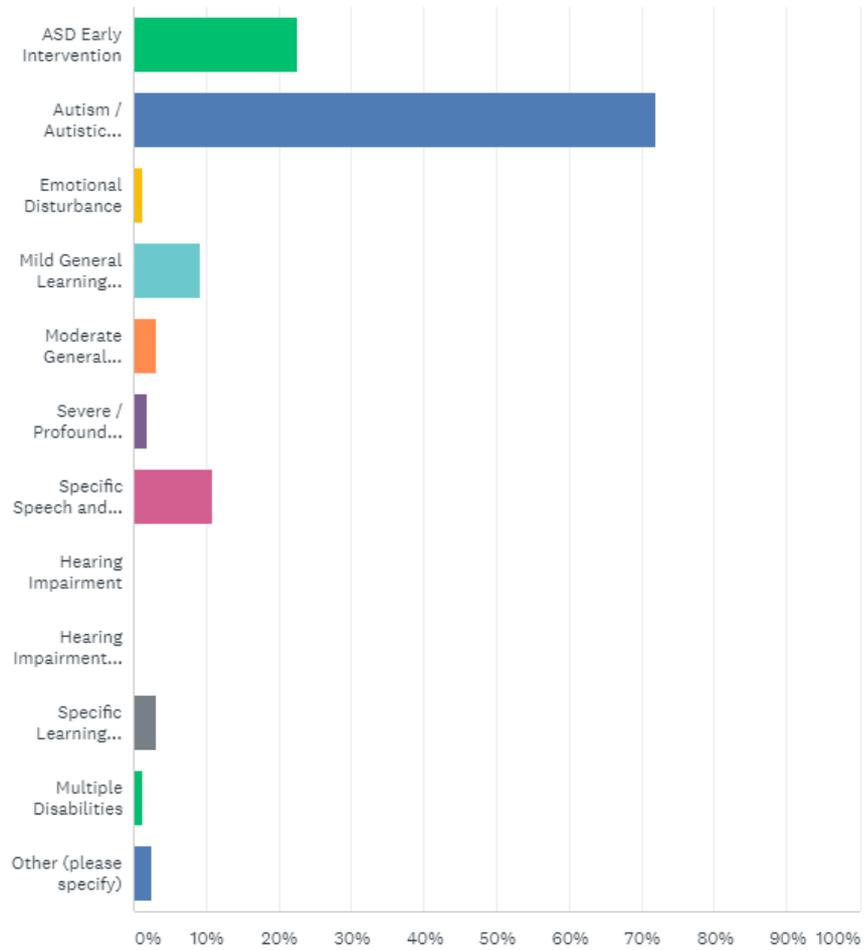
131 of respondents were administrative principals.

### Question 3

There were a variety of special class types represented throughout the survey.

#### Category of special class(es) in your school

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
ASD Early Intervention	22.56%	37
Autism / Autistic Spectrum Disorders	71.95%	118
Emotional Disturbance	1.22%	2
Mild General Learning Disability	9.15%	15
Moderate General Learning Disability	3.05%	5
Severe / Profound General Learning Disability	1.83%	3
Specific Speech and Language Disorder	10.98%	18
Hearing Impairment	0.00%	0
Hearing Impairment Early Intervention	0.00%	0
Specific Learning Disability	3.05%	5
Multiple Disabilities	1.22%	2
Other (please specify)	<a href="#">Responses</a> 2.44%	4
<b>Total Respondents: 164</b>		

#### **Question 4**

This question queried the number of special classes per school.

73 respondents had only one special class in their school.

61 respondents had two special classes.

18 respondents had three special classes.

8 respondents had four special classes.

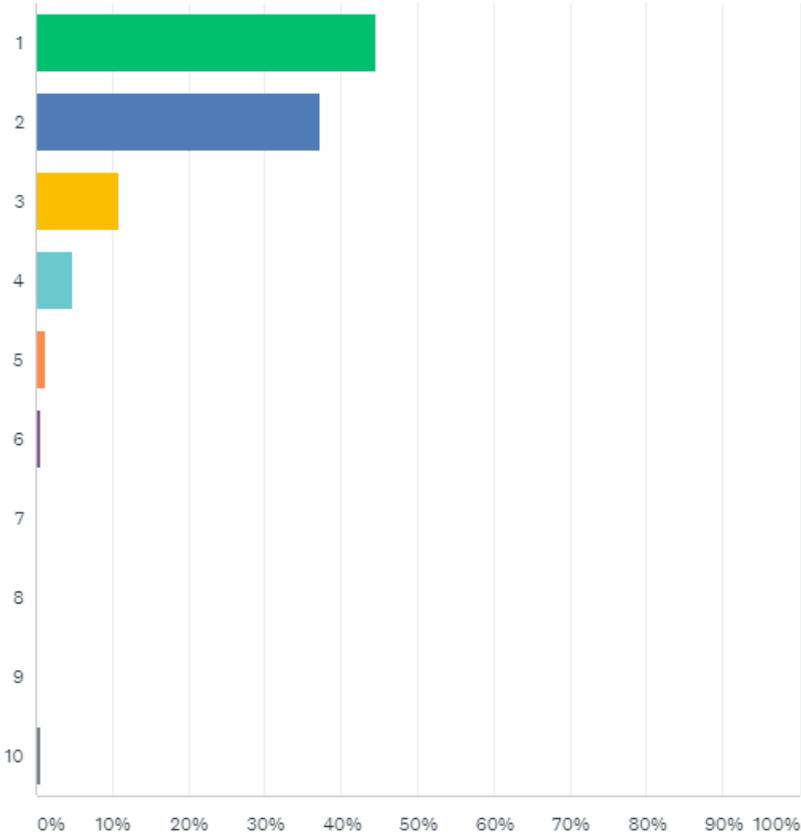
2 respondents had five special classes.

1 respondent had six special classes.

1 respondent had ten special classes.

# Number of special classes in your school

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



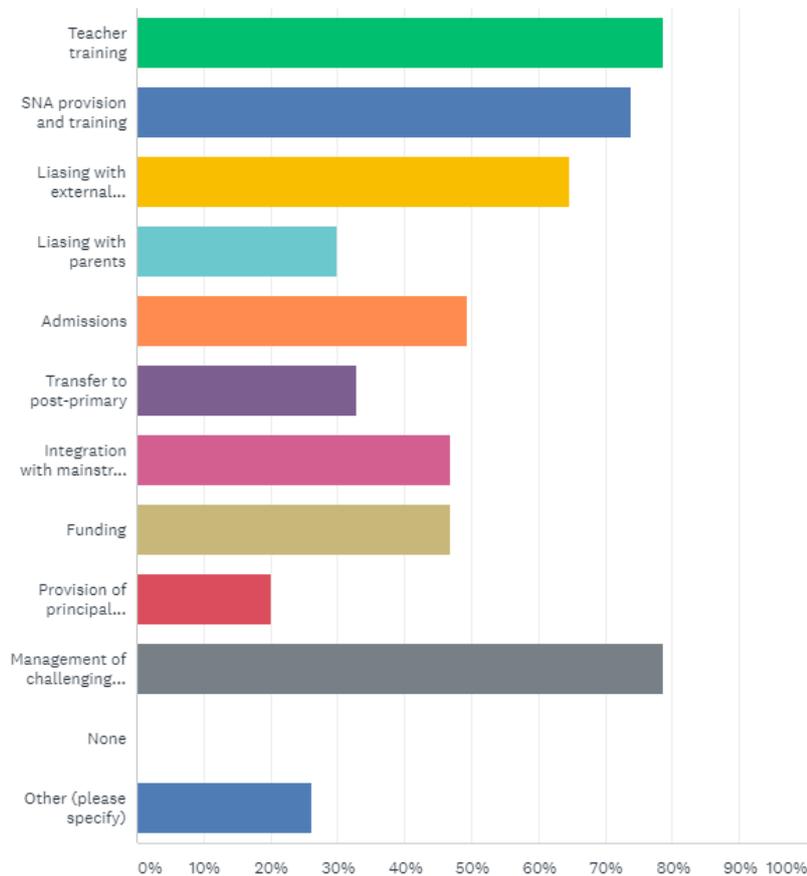
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ 1	44.51% 73
▼ 2	37.20% 61
▼ 3	10.98% 18
▼ 4	4.88% 8
▼ 5	1.22% 2
▼ 6	0.61% 1
▼ 7	0.00% 0
▼ 8	0.00% 0
▼ 9	0.00% 0
▼ 10	0.61% 1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>164</b>

## Question 5

This question queried areas of concern for the management of the special class. This was a multiple choice question, respondents could indicate as many areas as they felt to be necessary.

Please indicate the areas listed below which you feel are areas of concern in the management of your special class(es)

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
▼ Teacher training	78.66% 129
▼ SNA provision and training	73.78% 121
▼ Liaising with external organisations	64.63% 106
▼ Liaising with parents	29.88% 49
▼ Admissions	49.39% 81
▼ Transfer to post-primary	32.93% 54
▼ Integration with mainstream classes	46.95% 77
▼ Funding	46.95% 77
▼ Provision of principal release days	20.12% 33
▼ Management of challenging behaviour	78.66% 129
▼ None	0.00% 0
▼ Other (please specify)	Responses 26.22% 43
<b>Total Respondents: 164</b>	

The top two areas which schools find challenging are the management of challenging behaviour and teacher training.

<b>Area of concern</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Management of challenging behaviour	129	78.66%
Teacher training	129	78.66%
SNA provision and training	121	73.78%
Liaising with external organisations	106	64.63%
Admissions	81	49.39%
Integration with mainstream classes	77	46.95%
Funding	77	46.95%
Transfer to post-primary	54	32.93%
Liaising with parents	49	29.88%
Other	43	26.22%
Provision of principal release days	33	20.12%

The areas which were noted in the “other” category:

- Transport
- Suitability of children for placement in special class where integration will never materialise
- Difficulty accessing supports such as OT, NEPS, Speech and Language
- Lack of provision for substitute teachers for certain categories of absence
- Transfer to next educational placement (specifically mentioning transfer from ASD Early Intervention classes)
- Lack of purpose built facilities
- Training of staff to manage challenging behaviour and reduce the risk of harm to pupils and staff
- Increased workload on principals
- Willingness of teachers to teach special class without appropriate training

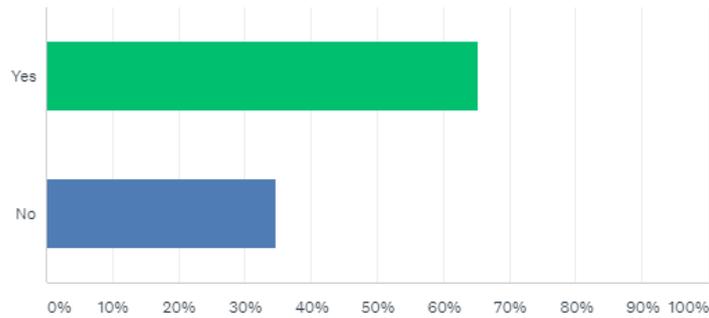
**Question 6**

65.24% of respondents (107) indicated that there is a waiting list for places in their special class(es).

34.76% of respondents (57) indicated that there is not a waiting list for places in their special class(es).

With regard to enrolment, is there a waiting list for places in your special class(es)?

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	65.24%	107
No	34.76%	57
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>164</b>

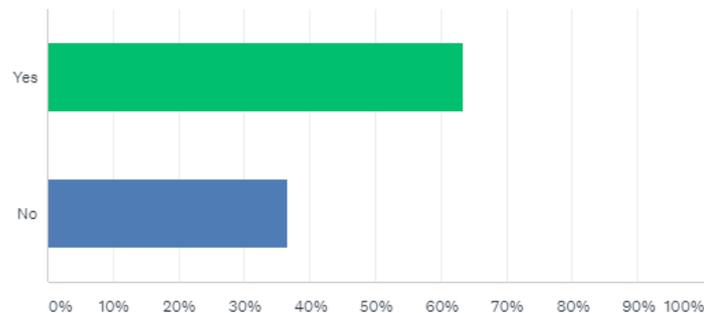
### **Question 7**

63.41% of respondents (104) stated that they would recommend opening a special class to a colleague.

36.59% of respondents (60) stated that they would not recommend opening a special class to a colleague.

Would you recommend opening a special class to a colleague?

Answered: 164 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Yes	63.41% 104
No	36.59% 60
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>164</b>

### **Question 8**

Question 8 asked for a reason for the respondents' answer regarding whether or not they would recommend opening a special class to a colleague.

The main reason given was inclusion of children with SEN, follow by the fact that the special class has had a positive impact on the school generally.

However, there were a number of concerns raised around the opening of a special class including:

- Managing challenging behaviour
- Difficulty accessing appropriate training for teachers and SNAs
- Difficulty accessing external supports such as Occupational Therapy, NEPS, Speech and Language Therapy
- Increased workload on principals, particularly teaching principals

Some quotes:

- The benefit it provides to the children and families involved far outweighs the workload attached to same. For many children, the only possible way they can attend school every day is because of the existence of a special class in a school.
- It is heartbreaking to see so many parents with no place [in a school] for their child. Despite the lack of funding, time, resources, training, time, time, time and time, I would open another 6 classes just to give the children places. Despite lack of training and lack of funds,

teachers and SNAs with empathy and passion to help children will do a better job than the child being put into a mainstream class where they cannot cope.

- Having special classes in our school allows a vision of inclusion to be truly implemented and celebrated. However, it is extremely hard work and does not receive the recognition, in terms of funding, support and resources, that is required.
- I would only recommend to a Principal to open if sanctioned two classes and therefore achieve Admin status. No administrative days given to establish class, meet parents, pupils, their external teams, purchase furniture, deal with builders, visit pupils current settings etc.
- There is no support with regard to enrolment policy, advice on school transport & bus escorts, and no additional allowance for the management of ancillary staff. While the inclusion of the children with ASD has been hugely positive for our school, it has been a very difficult & stressful time personally.
- It is almost like operating a separate school
- Violence in unit can be scary

### **Question 9**

Question 9 was an open-ended question which asked “if there are any comments or observations which you wish to make regarding special classes, please indicate”.

The main issues raised related to:

- Difficulty accessing training for staff working in special classes
- Lack of support from outside agencies
- Management of challenging behaviour
- Funding for renovated buildings vs purpose-built settings
- Management of bus escorts
- Remuneration for principals who manage extra staff such as SNAs and bus escorts
- Increased workload for all principals, but particularly evident for teaching principals
- Parents’ experiences of public services, in general, in terms of seeking supports for their child, have often been quite poor and this leads parents to sometimes have a combative initial attitude to the provision of any public service for their child, including education.

Some quotes:

- I do not agree with the recent proposal to compel schools to take a special class as there is not an adequate support structure for schools
- The school as a whole has benefited from the ASD class. I feel we need more support for SNA's who are on the receiving end of a lot of physical assaults. This may become an issue in future times where I can see SNA's suing for injuries received eg broken nose, clot in arm due to bite, bang to the head, kicks and slaps to the face.
- The area of challenging behaviour must be addressed. Funding for training must be provided to schools in order for appropriate training to be given to Teachers and SNAs to deal appropriately and safely with instances of physical aggression.
- Huge additional workload for the principal given the needs of the pupils and the inevitable increase in personnel.
- I feel there should be financial remuneration for principals managing additional staff, ie SNAs, in special classes as there is a considerable workload attached to same.

- The area of challenging behaviour must be addressed. Funding for training must be provided to schools in order for appropriate training to be given to Teachers and SNAs to deal appropriately and safely with instances of physical aggression.



**Oifig an Ard-Rúnaí**  
An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna



**Office of the Secretary General**  
Department of Education and Skills

Alan Guidon  
Clerk to the Committee  
Joint Committee on Education and Skills  
Leinster House  
Dublin 2

Your Ref: JCES4/C/1/C/11

*7 June 2018*

**Re: Invitation to make a written submission in relation to the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State.**

Dear Alan,

The following is a detailed response to the invitation from the Chairperson of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills, Ms Fiona O'Loughlin, TD, to make a written submission in relation to the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State.

The following pages and paragraphs are numbered for reference as requested.

### **Introduction**

1. The policy of this Department is that all children with Special Educational Needs, including those with Autism, can have access to an education appropriate to their needs, preferably in school settings through the primary and post primary school network.
2. Such placements facilitate access to individualised education programmes which may draw from a range of appropriate educational interventions, delivered by fully qualified professional teachers, with the support of Special Needs Assistants and the appropriate school curriculum.
3. This policy has been informed by published research, including the Report of the Task Force on Autism (2001), the Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) (2006) and National Council for Special

Education (NCSE) policy advice on Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2016).

4. The NCSE policy advice on Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2016) found that Students are generally well supported in schools with appropriate curriculum; extensive teacher and SNA supports; improving range of educational placements supported by improved accommodation and equipment; improved teacher knowledge and understanding and a generally good standard of provision at primary and post primary levels.
5. The NCSE policy advice noted that ASD is a spectrum condition, so some students with ASD require relatively little support in school and are relatively independent in their learning, while others require significant levels of support. The NCSE Policy Advice also states that International Research findings suggest that most students with ASD should be considered for inclusion in mainstream education with their peers, where inclusion is well-planned and well-resourced.
6. However, it is recognised that for many children with Special Educational Needs including Autism that placement in special schools or in special classes in mainstream schools will be required. Decisions about placement should be based on individual needs and take into account a number of factors including parental wishes, availability of evidence-based interventions and supports including well-trained teachers and Special Needs Assistants. There is therefore not one preferred educational environment for children with ASD, rather there is a model which takes into account the assessed educational needs of individual pupils.
7. As such, this Department's policy focuses on ensuring that all students, including those with Autism Spectrum Disorders, can have access to an education appropriate to meeting their needs and abilities.

### **Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs**

8. In 2018, almost €1.75 billion will be invested in Special Education, nearly one fifth of the overall Education budget, and up 43% since 2011. This includes an allocation of over €300 million towards providing additional resources specifically to support students with Autism in schools.
9. The range of supports and services which are made available include 13,400 additional Special Education Teachers in mainstream schools, 15,000 Special Needs Assistants by the end of this year. Other resources which are provided to schools to support children with Special Educational Needs including Autism include the following:
  - The National Educational Psychological Service
  - Assistive technology.

- Continued Professional development for teachers.
- Access to the Special School transport scheme.
- Access to special equipment and furniture where required.
- Enhanced capitation grants.
- Adapted school buildings.
- Access to the extended school year scheme. (July Provision)

### **Special Classes in Mainstream Schools**

10. The greater proportion of children with Autism attend mainstream classes, but some students may find it difficult to manage full-time placement there and will require the environment of an ASD special class for some or all of their time in school and for a minority of children with Special Educational Needs including Autism, placements in a Special School may be required.
11. The NCSE policy advice on Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2016) found that almost 18,000 students in schools have been diagnosed with Autism. Of these
  - 63% of students attended mainstream schools
  - 26% attended special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, and
  - 11% attended special schools.
12. Enrolment in an ASD special class should be considered where it has been demonstrated that a student requires the support of a special class because he/she is unable to learn effectively in a mainstream class for most or all of the school day even with appropriate supports.
13. Students enrolling in ASD Special Classes must have a report from a relevant professional or team of professionals (for example, psychologist, psychiatrist) stating that:
  - S/he has ASD
  - S/he has significant learning needs that require the support of a special class setting and the reasons why this is the case.
14. Special classes for students with ASD are staffed with a lower pupil-teacher ratio of 6:1 at primary level and 6:1.5 at post primary level, and also have a minimum of two SNAs for every class of 6 children.
15. The NCSE, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), in consultation with the relevant education partners, is responsible for the

establishment of special classes in various geographical areas where there is an identified need.

16. The NCSE is aware of emerging need from year to year, and where special class provision is required, it is planned and established to meet that need. The NCSE continues to establish additional special classes to support children with Special Educational Needs including Autism as required.
17. Since 2011, the NCSE has increased the number of such classes by over 130% from 548 in 2011 to 1,304 across the country now. This network includes 1,048 ASD special classes, of which 130 are ASD early intervention classes, 641 primary ASD classes and 277 post-primary ASD classes in mainstream schools. In addition there are currently 124 Special schools of which 20 cater exclusively for children with Autism.
18. While it is not always possible or practical that a special class placement would be available in the child's local school, the NCSE has informed the Department that, in general, they are satisfied that there are sufficient ASD special class placements to meet existing demand.
19. The NCSE, in looking to open special classes, must take into account the present and future potential need for such classes, taking particular account of the educational needs of the children concerned. The NCSE will also take account of location and sustainability in looking to establish special classes in certain areas.
20. It is expected that significant growth in Post Primary Special Class provision will be required in the coming years. NCSE data suggests that much of the growth of special classes in primary schools took place in recent years. Planning for future Post Primary Special Class provision is therefore taking place now to ensure there are placement options available for those children who may require such provision on transfer from the Primary Special Classes.
21. The Department continues to work with the NCSE to ensure that there is appropriate planning in place to ensure that all children who require special class placements can access such placements in schools within their communities. To this end the Department and the NCSE have convened a working group to put in place a new working protocol to ensure that there is effective pro-active planning and timely delivery of specialist educational places for students in special classes and special schools.
22. The focus of the working group is to guide the development of necessary placements in schools in the short, medium and longer terms to meet the anticipated needs of

pupils and to ensure that any necessary school building or refurbishment and school transport considerations are resolved as early as possible so that placement options can be accessed where and when they are needed.

23. My Department has acknowledged that in recent years the establishment of special class provision in some schools and communities has been challenging. As part of the process of planning for future provision, a number of measures have been included in the (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 to provide certain powers to the NCSE to designate a school placement for a child in circumstances where a child is experiencing difficulties in securing enrolment.
24. The Bill also proposes powers for the Minister, in certain circumstances, to require a school to open a special class for children with special educational needs. This amendment will give the Minister the power to compel a school to open a special class or classes where the National Council for Special Education has identified a need for such provision within an area.
25. These measures, if introduced, will further enhance the ability of the Department and the NCSE to plan for special class provision and to address issues in provision that may arise from time in time at local levels.

### **National Educational Psychological Service**

26. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) provides a psychological service to mainstream primary and post-primary schools. NEPS' role is to support the personal, social, and educational development of all children through the application of psychological theory and practice, to support the wellbeing, and academic, social and emotional development of all learners. NEPS prioritises support for learners at risk of educational disadvantage and those with special educational needs (SEN). NEPS service to schools provides a balance between casework and support and development work. Casework is targeted at effecting change for individual pupils experiencing complex learning, social and emotional difficulties. This work is carried out through a consultation and problem solving framework as set out in the Continuum of Support Guidelines. Support and development involves work of a more preventative nature where the psychologists may engage in training or provision of policy advice and guidance in order to enhance schools' capacity to intervene early to address needs.
27. NEPS Psychologist numbers have grown over the past two years from some 162 whole-time equivalent (w.t.e.) staff in December 2016 to a current level of 184 w.t.e, with a further ten posts allowed to the service in Budget 2018 for engagement in the coming academic year. These increases are mitigated somewhat by growth in overall

pupil demographics in schools and ongoing increases in the number of Special Classes nationally, predominantly providing for children with Autism.

28. Providing support to schools to address the needs of children with ASD is a significant aspect of the work of a NEPS psychologist across the range of placement settings including mainstream classes, Special Classes and Special Schools. This may involve screening, consultation and assessment to build up a profile of a child's strengths and needs in order to support educational planning and intervention. It may also include, as appropriate, referring children to multidisciplinary teams for ASD diagnosis. In the course of their work, psychologists are often involved in providing guidance and support around points of transition. Psychologists provide advice to schools and parents on placement, including making recommendations on placement options, covering special classes and special schools. They may also be involved with teachers and parents in monitoring outcomes and review of placement. At whole-school level, psychologists provide advice on effective provision for children with special educational needs, including use of the continuum of support process to identify and respond to need.
29. NEPS allocates service time to schools using a points weighting system which taken account of school pupil numbers, school type (primary or post-primary), gender profile, DEIS status and an adjustment for small schools (those with less than 160 pupils). A limited weighting is also applied for special classes. Psychologists thus assigned a complement of schools, assess the relative priorities of need through planning meetings in individual schools with school principals and special education teachers and agree a programme of work for each.
30. While there are benefits for students placed in special class provision, there are also advantages associated with mainstream placement which provides maximum access to mainstream peers and to the full school curriculum. Children with ASD in mainstream provision have access to support from special education teachers, and special needs assistants, where significant care needs have been identified. There are also benefits associated with placement in special schools where there are well-established systems for supporting those children with more complex needs. Thus NEPS supports the availability of a continuum of provision, i.e. whereby children with SEN may access mainstream, special class and special school placements, based on their needs.
31. I am grateful to the Committee for the opportunity to provide an update on this very important area of the Department's work. I would be pleased to provide any additional information members might require by way of explanation or clarification of any of the matters in the foregoing paragraphs.

Yours Sincerely

  
Seán Ó Foghlú  
Ard Rúnaí / Secretary General



INTO Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee  
on Education and Skills

7 June 2018

Provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools

## 1. Introduction

**The Irish National Teachers' Organisation welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education on Skills on the *Provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools.***

As inclusive education has evolved in more recent years, an increasing number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are now enrolled in Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Special Classes within mainstream schools. Consequently, ASD and Special Classes have developed to become an integral and essential part of the Irish education system. It is important that the State continues to offer a range of provision in order to ensure that children obtain the best possible education in a setting that suits their needs. The INTO believes that all schools are inclusive schools including Special Schools and schools with ASD and Special Classes. Inclusive education does not necessarily mean that all pupils must be enrolled in mainstream classes. The INTO believes that a range of options must continue to be available to parents.

The maintenance of a continuum of provision to include ASD and Special Classes is essential to ensure that the educational needs of all children are met. The INTO is fully supportive of a policy of inclusion, where it is in the best interests of the child and where resources are provided to meet the needs of the child. We must always be mindful of the potential effect on the child and class teacher of having a child who is either misplaced in a mainstream setting or for whom the back-up support services are not being provided for by the State. An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through the provision of resources, support and therapeutic services and professional development creates significant challenges for pupils and teachers.

## 2. Setting Up Special Classes

The INTO advocates better planning across the system for the establishment of ASD and Special Classes to ensure all pupils have access irrespective of demographics or geographical location. While NCSE and NEPS should work with schools around the establishment of special classes, offering relevant support, advice and encouragement, the INTO is of the view that the Board of Management of a school should retain the autonomy to decide whether to establish **a Special Class based on the school's individual context and circumstances at a given time.** Establishing a Special Class in a school against the interests of the school community is likely to be counter-productive and could lead to a negative atmosphere both in the school and class, which would not be in the best interest of the pupils. Boards of Management should consult

with staff prior to making such decisions, because the decision to establish a special class in a school changes the teaching context of a school.

A tension exists at present for schools regarding the protocol for admitting pupils to ASD and Special Classes. The INTO states that in order to access a special class a student must have a report from a relevant professional or team of professionals, for example, psychologist, speech and language therapist, psychiatrist (NCSE, 2016, p.3). Some professionals, however, are reluctant to state this on the grounds that school selection is a matter of parental choice. The INTO believes that this conflict should be clarified as it leads to confusion and delays for parents and schools in accessing the best possible setting for a pupil.

### 3. Supporting Principals

The INTO welcomes the publication of the *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes (NCSE, 2016)* for Boards of Management and Principals of schools. The INTO also **notes with positivity the proposals as set out in the NCSE's Policy Advice on the Education of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2015)** proposing that professional development opportunities should be made available for principal teachers, particularly in relation to setting up and managing special classes.

Establishing and managing ASD and Special Classes creates an additional administrative workload on principal teachers. The INTO recommends that additional administrative days should be granted to teaching principals for the establishment and maintenance of ASD and Special Classes. It was regrettable that this issue was not addressed in the recent publication of Circular 0040/2018 *Release Time for Principal Teachers in Primary Schools*. There is a significant workload associated with leading and managing a special class and this task is particularly onerous for teaching principals. In light of the additional administration and staff management associated with ASD and Special Classes, the INTO recommends a further reduction of the point at which administrative principalships are granted to schools with ASD classes.

In addition, the INTO recommends full time qualified school secretaries should be available to all schools with ASD and Special Classes. The role of secretaries in schools with ASD and Special Classes has become more complex with increasing demands for data gathering and form filling. Such tasks often fall to the principal teacher in the absence of sufficient administrative support, thereby increasing their workload.

### 4. Transitions

Collaborative multidisciplinary assessment should be readily available in a pre-school setting to increase early intervention. Schools should be better supported with the transition of

children with SEN from pre-school to primary and primary to post-primary level. Protocols should be agreed around the transfer of information and continuity of support to ensure that there is no gap in the provision of resources. It is regrettable that the increase in Special Classes at primary level is not matched by a corresponding increase in Special Class provision at second level. This creates significant difficulties for pupils transferring from primary to post-primary, particularly those who require a continuity of experience and support.

## 5. Professional Development

Following the recent re-conceptualisation of initial teacher education programmes, all graduates now complete modules on inclusive education. However, initial teacher education **in inclusive education must be built upon throughout a teacher's career and all teachers should** be given the opportunity to engage in professional development in relation to inclusion and special educational needs. The national framework for teacher professional development, *Cosán*, should include special education and ensure access to CPD in education for ASD for all teachers. The national framework should also address issues such as funding and resourcing of ongoing teacher professional development.

The INTO believes that induction and ongoing professional development are necessary for teachers working in special education settings. In that regard, the INTO welcomes the NCSE recommendation that special class teachers should be supported to engage in appropriate learning opportunities to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to be a special class teacher (NCSE, 2016). Access to continuous professional development must be sustained on an ongoing basis to ensure teachers are supported in current and best practice. However, adequate resources, including substitution cover, must be in place to allow teachers to engage with professional development prior to the establishment of Special Classes. In particular, teachers would value more opportunities for professional development in the form of summer courses to ensure that they are prepared in advance of their placement in a Special Class in September. Furthermore, teachers should also have the opportunity to visit other special classes to see, at first hand, how these classes operate. Again, substitution cover and time must be in place so that visits or liaison with these schools can be accommodated.

The *Regional Support Service*, currently being established by the NCSE, has great potential to offer initial and ongoing support to schools with ASD and Special Classes. The INTO believes that qualified teachers with additional expertise in special education should form the core of the *Regional Support Services* if the service is to offer advice, support and professional development to teachers.

## 6. SNAs

Professional development and training should also be available to SNAs in relation to supporting all pupils with special educational needs, particularly pupils in ASD and Special Classes. Sufficient funding should be granted to schools for this purpose. Consideration should also be given to extending the remit of the SESS to include the provision of professional development and training for SNAs.

In the context of supporting integration and inclusion, the INTO recommends that adequate SNA support is available for pupils who attend ASD and Special Classes to integrate and transition smoothly into mainstream settings on a gradual basis.

## 7. Multidisciplinary Supports

Pupils who access ASD and Special Classes have unique additional needs that require specific therapeutic support that is often beyond the remit of the teacher. The lack of availability of in-school, multi-disciplinary supports is a major weakness in the system at present. The expectation gap between schools and the HSE needs to be closed and a clear policy developed regarding the provision of therapeutic services to schools. It is imperative that the DES and their counterparts in the Department of Health and Department of Children and Youth Affairs devise a model to enable children attending school to be provided with the therapeutic services they require, preferably on an in-school arrangement. It is unacceptable that, due to the lack of therapists, teachers are being asked to take on the duties of other professionals, such as Speech and Language Therapists or Occupational Therapists. The INTO welcomes the commitment by the Government to pilot a model of in-school speech and language therapy, and further recommends that other therapies should be available onsite at school also. The INTO further notes and supports a recommendation in the *Review of the SNA Scheme* which proposes that ring-fenced funding should be provided for the development of an in-school therapy service (NCSE, 2018. P.6).

A stronger interdepartmental approach with an improved communication system is essential for educational planning to ensure that services are delivered in a coherent and unified way. Unless an adequate level of funding is provided by the DES and / or the Department of Health inclusion cannot succeed. The NCSE *Regional Support Service* should provide the opportunity needed for a co-ordinated set of support services to be offered to schools to support special education provision.

## 8. Crisis Situations

Guidelines for schools and teachers in relation to dealing with crisis situations are urgently required, particularly in relation to developing emergency procedures for crisis situations arising from incidences of challenging behaviour and violent outbursts. Teachers and principal teachers are increasingly reporting serious incidence that threaten the health and safety of staff and other pupils in mainstream, ASD and Special Classes. It is vital to fully implement all aspects of the EPSEN Act (2004) including the clauses in the Act that seek to protect the rights of other pupils in a class to an education that is not impacted negatively from a policy of inclusion.

Teachers find it extremely difficult to respond to episodes of challenging behaviour without access to the necessary clinical and therapeutic advice. In that regard, the INTO is of the view that the current support offered by the National Behaviour Support Service to post-primary schools should be extended to primary schools without delay. Guidelines must also be provided which would include advice and support around restrictive practices and restraint in extreme circumstances where the health and safety of other pupils and staff members is being compromised. The publication of guidelines should be accompanied by CPD and should have legal standing to protect school staff and pupils. Teachers need to be protected from any potential accusations of assault where they intervene in situations where pupils are a danger to themselves or others. Teachers are *in loco parentis* and should be treated accordingly when intervening in crisis situations.

The availability of a temporary, alternative environment may be necessary if a child is particularly distressed or demonstrating extremely violent behaviour. While it is laudable that there should be provision **in schools for the facility of a quiet space to meet students' sensory** needs, extra funding needs to be granted to schools for this purpose. Currently the schools with only one Special Class receive fewer ancillary rooms than schools with two or more Special Classes. The INTO believes that all schools with Special Classes should be provided with a quiet room, a soft room and small hall facilities irrespective of the number of Special Classes attached to the school. Moreover, the provision of sensory spaces and quiet rooms should become an integral feature of school design for all new schools.

## 9. Concluding Comments

Teachers are to the fore in making inclusion a reality in mainstream, ASD and Special Classes. The DES and the NCSE need to acknowledge and address their needs and experiences, including their health and safety needs and their needs regarding professional development. For a policy of inclusion to be successful teachers in ASD and Special Classes must be

supported with professional development opportunities, multi-disciplinary services and adequate resources and facilities.

The INTO is engaged in ongoing consultation with teachers and principal teachers to garner views on the provision of ASD and Special Classes. The INTO will further explore these views and issues at its biennial Special Education Conference in March 2019.

The INTO strongly believes that ASD and Special Classes can, and must, continue to provide an essential part of the continuum of provision for children with special educational needs. The Organisation looks forward to engaging in more detailed discussions on the issues arising from the provision of ASD and Special Classes.

## References

NCSE (2015) *Policy Advice on the Education of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

NCSE (2016) *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes*

**Joint Committee on Education and Skills**

**Provision of ASD and Special Classes in Mainstream Schools**

**Written Submission**

**National Council for Special Education**

7<sup>th</sup> June 2018

## 1. Introduction

1.1 The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) welcomes the opportunity to assist the Committee's work in relation to the provision of special classes in mainstream schools.

1.2 The role of the NCSE is to establish special classes in mainstream schools to educate students for whom full-time placement in a mainstream class is not in line with their needs.

## 2. Which students enrol in special classes?

2.1 A list of the types of special classes is provided in Appendix 1.

2.2 Enrolment in a special class is considered where it is demonstrated that a student requires the support of a special class because he/she is unable to learn effectively in a mainstream class for most or all of the school day even with appropriate supports. This includes some students who, although academically able to access the curriculum in mainstream, may find it too difficult to manage full-time placement there due, for example, to very significant behaviour or sensory needs which have not been ameliorated, even with appropriate intervention.

2.3 In order to enrol in a special class a student must have a report from a relevant professional or team of professionals (e.g. psychologist, speech and language therapist, psychiatrist) stating that s/he has a disability and complex or severe learning needs that require the support of a special class setting and the reasons why this is the case.

2.4 In 2015 the NCSE published policy advice on supporting students with ASD in schools<sup>1</sup>. Of some 13,873 students with ASD in the school system:

- 63 per cent were educated in mainstream classes
- 23 per cent were educated in special classes in mainstream primary and post-primary
- 14 per cent were educated in 118 special schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Available on the NCSE website at: [http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1\\_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf](http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/1_NCSE-Supporting-Students-ASD-Schools.pdf)

In addition:

- 23 per cent of all students with resource teaching hours were students with ASD
- 25 per cent of all resource teaching posts were allocated for ASD
- 73 per cent of all special classes approved were for ASD
- About 40 per cent of all students with SNA support had ASD
- 69 per cent of all students with ASD accessed SNA support.

### **3 NCSE Policy Advice 2015: Matters Relevant to Special Classes**

3.1 The NCSE found that in general, educational provision in Ireland for students with ASD has significantly improved in recent years.

3.2 We found some confusion in the system about the purpose and role of special classes for students with ASD, with some schools appearing to believe that the classes are resourced only to cater for the more able students with ASD – whereas in fact they are resourced to cater for the needs of students with special educational needs who require to spend most or all of their week in a special setting. It is important that schools are clear about the purpose of special classes so as to ensure that students are educated in the appropriate educational setting.

3.3 We raised the point that the current special class model may not be the most suitable for post-primary schools. There can be a wide age and ability range represented in post-primary special classes and in some post-primary schools, special classes can be a segregated entity where teachers can feel isolated and de-skilled in terms of teaching their own subject area.

3.4 In our view, students in post-primary special classes should be given access to a broad-based post-primary curriculum either through being included in mainstream classes wherever possible or by having a small number of specialist teachers allocated to teach their subjects at the appropriate levels to the special class. The number of teachers involved with the post-primary special class should be kept to the minimum necessary to provide students with access to a broad-based post-primary curriculum – however some schools have a practice of spreading special class hours across a large number of teachers.

3.5 We recommended that models of support in post-primary schools should be age appropriate. More able students with ASD should be supported through resourced mainstream provision while only those with complex needs should be placed in a special class.

3.6 NCSE recommendations in this regard are currently being considered by the DES. Further research commissioned by the NCSE raises concern that students, once enrolled in special schools or classes, rarely re-enrol in mainstream education. In addition, the level of inclusion in mainstream classes can be limited and access to the curriculum may be limited e.g. Irish as a subject may not be provided.

#### 4 Current Provision

4.1 In the 2018-2019 school year there will be **1,454** special classes in place for students with special educational needs<sup>2</sup>. Of these **73%** (1,057) are in primary schools and **27%** (397) are in post-primary schools. Of these, **82%** (1,190) are for students with ASD (includes 128 early intervention classes for children diagnosed with ASD aged 3-5 years). This information is summarised in the table below:

**Table 1: Special Class Provision 2018-2019**

Total No	Primary	Post-primary	ASD
1,454	1,057 (73%)	397 (27%)	1,190 (82%)

4.2 The full breakdown of special classes across disability categories is provided in Appendix 1.

#### 5 Staffing of Special Classes

5.1 Teacher and SNA supports are allocated to special classes on the basis of student or class based ratios specified for each designated disability category – see Appendix 2 for staffing ratios. For example, a primary special class for students with ASD will have one teacher and a minimum of two SNAs allocated for six students – a post-primary special class will have 1.5 teachers and two SNAs for six students.

5.2 Where circumstances arise where the specified level of care support is not sufficient to meet the care needs of enrolled students, the school may apply to the NCSE for access to additional care supports. If the care needs are above what the school can reasonably

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<sup>2</sup> This represents an increase of 153 classes from the previous school year – 103 in primary schools and 50 in post-primary schools

be expected to provide within the prescribed baseline ratio, the NCSE will allocate additional care supports to the school.

## **6 Establishment of Special Classes**

6.1 Schools apply to the NCSE to open a special class where a need has been identified in their area i.e. a number of students have professional reports indicating they require the support of a special class.

6.2 SENOs may also approach a school directly where they are aware that a special class is or will be required in the near future. SENOs consult with other education partners (e.g. NEPS and Inspectorate) when planning to set up a special class. They consult with DES School Planning and Building Section where special classes are being incorporated into a new school building.

6.3 Before approaching a particular school to request the establishment of a special class, SENOs take into account both present and future potential need within the area and must be satisfied that the class is sustainable and appropriately located. The DES has issued retention rates which guide SENOs in determining sustainability – see Appendix 2 for DES Retention Ratios for Special Classes. In addition the SENO will consider:

- The school's accommodation and accessibility
- The number of special classes, if any, already in the school.

6.4 The final decision to open a special class rests with the school's Board of Management. However, the overriding consideration must be to respond to the needs of students with special educational needs who, had they not additional needs, would ordinarily attend a school in their local community.

6.5 The NCSE has published guidelines for Boards of Management and Principals of primary and post-primary schools on setting up and organising special classes which is available on the NCSE website at: <http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Guidelines-SettingUp-Special-Classes-PostPrimary.pdf>.

6.6 In recent years, the NCSE has opened substantial numbers of special classes and many, many schools have agreed willingly to open such classes. This is most welcome and there is a growing recognition that such classes enhance the educational provision and experiences of all students, not just those enrolled in the classes. However, the NCSE is aware of situations where it has not proved possible to obtain

the agreement of some schools to open special classes. The reasons for such a decision can vary – from lack of appropriate accommodation to concern about a perceived inadequacy in resources provided to schools and occasionally schools simply do not wish to be rushed into a decision about opening a special class.

6.7 The NCSE therefore welcomes the provision in the forthcoming Admissions to Schools legislation (see below) which will enable the Minister for Education and Skills, once set procedures and processes have been followed, to require a school to open a special class. This provision will enable planning for special classes to be done on a more systematic basis.

## **7 Planning for a Continuum of Provision for Students with ASD**

7.1 We note that the Joint Committee is seeking to ‘undertake an examination into the level and impact of the apparent shortages (...of special classes), especially at post-primary level’.

7.2 Over the last few years, there has been there has been a significant increase in the number of special classes in mainstream schools rising from 39 classes in 2001 to 1,454 in 2018 – with the bulk of this increase happening in primary schools. As these students move through the primary system, the NCSE has sought to ensure appropriate post-primary placements are available for these students.

7.3 Students’ needs change over time. Some students develop greater independence and confidence as they progress through primary school and may no longer require a special class placement in post-primary. Other students can require a special class placement in post-primary school (when they didn’t in primary school) because they find it extremely difficult to navigate the greater complexity of the post-primary system and to meet curricular demands. Other students leaving primary schools enrol in special schools. Therefore long-term planning is not an exact science and the NCSE is appreciative that so many post-primary schools are working with their NCSE’s Special Educational Needs Organisers to open special classes at post primary level.

7.4 In 2015<sup>3</sup> however the NCSE noted that despite the growth and corresponding improvement in educational provision for students with ASD, the availability of appropriate mainstream and special placements continued to be problematic in certain

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<sup>3</sup> NCSE (2015). Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools. NCSE: Trim

areas of the State, particularly for students with ASD who have more complex learning and/or behavioural difficulties. We further noted that the NCSE was unable to oblige a board of management to accept a student into a school with restrictive enrolment policies or practices. Neither were we able to oblige a school to open a special class – even when there was an identified need within that school’s community. We recommended that the NCSE should be given the necessary authority to instruct a school to open a special class, when deemed necessary.

7.5 Since then the Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill has provided for the situation where a child (with special needs or otherwise) cannot find a school place, by allowing the NCSE or Tusla (Child and Family Agency) to designate a school place for the child. A recent report stage amendment to the same Bill provides for the Minister to require a school to open a special class for children with special educational needs, where a Board refuses to do so where a need has been identified.

7.6 These measures are welcome and ensure an appropriate resolution in those few cases where difficulties arise.

7.7 The NCSE recognises that our own planning protocols underpinning the establishment of special classes need to be strengthened. There needs to be much closer alignment with the school planning and building unit and school transport section to streamline current practice and to allow for proper future planning. We also need to utilise available data more effectively. A DES/NCSE working group commenced work on 6 June 2018 to develop and agree better arrangements for effective pro-active planning and timely delivery of specialist educational places in, and school transport arrangements for, students who need to enrol in special classes and special schools.

7.8 This group is scheduled to complete its work by September 2018.

## **8 NCSE Support Service**

8.1 The Special Education Support Service (SESS), the National Behaviour Support Service (NBSS) and the Visiting Teacher Service transferred to the NCSE in 2017 and together with SENOs these groups have amalgamated to form the new NCSE Support Service.

8.2 The DES funds the NCSE Support Service to provide continuing professional development (CPD) and in-school support for teachers of students with special educational needs in mainstream and special settings, including those with ASD. The

objective of the programme is to enable teachers to adopt evidence based approaches to teaching students in special and mainstream classes.

8.3 In relation to teachers of students with ASD the programme aims to:

- enhance teachers' understanding of the nature of autism and the learning and teaching implications for each individual student and teacher
- enable teachers' skills in planning for assessment
- enhance teachers' strategies and skills, theoretical and practical, towards ensuring appropriate curricular access for effective learning
- enhance teachers' use of a variety of interventions and teaching approaches for students with autism, based on the assessed needs of the students and taking account of empirically-based research
- enable teachers to assess, plan, and implement effective teaching strategies with a view to meeting the needs of students through individualised planning
- enable the teachers' skills in preventing, identifying and managing challenging behaviour
- enable teachers to facilitate students' skills in self-management of their individual behaviours.

8.4 In the 2017 – 2018 school year there was a full programme of ASD seminars delivered for teachers with 2000 places available across the courses. These courses were available at different venues throughout the country. A full list of the courses is available in Appendix 3.

**9.0 The NCSE would be pleased to provide any further assistance to the committee should this be necessary.**

**Appendix 1: Special Classes Across Disability Categories (18/19 school year)**

<b>Class Type</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Post Primary</b>	<b>Grand Total</b>
ASD Early Intervention	128	0	128
Autism/Autistic Spectrum Disorders	741	321	1,062
Emotional Disturbance	9	2	11
Hearing Impairment	10	5	15
HI Early Intervention	1	0	1
Mild General Learning Disability	44	15	59
Moderate General Learning Disability	20	43	63
Multiple Disabilities	17	11	28
Severe/Profound General Learning Disability	9	0	9
Specific Learning Disability	12	0	12
Specific Speech and Language Disorder	66	0	66
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1,057</b>	<b>397</b>	<b>1,454</b>

## Appendix 2: Staffing & Retention Ratios & Capitation Grant for Special Classes

Category	PTR Primary	PTR Post- Prim	Class: SNA Ratio	Enrolment Retention Level	Capitation Grants - primary <sup>4</sup>
Visual impairment	8:1	8:1.5	4:1	5	€819
Hearing	7:1	7:1.5	4:1	5	€819 €840 (Profound)
Mild General Learning Disability	11:1	11:1.5	4:1	9	€436 (<12 yrs) €650 (>12 yrs)
Moderate General Learning Disability	8:1	8:1.5	2:1	6	€819
Severe/Profound Learning Disability	6:1	6:1.5	2:1	SENO*	€840
Emotional/Behavioural Disturbance	8:1	8:1.5	4:1	6	€819
Severe Emotional/Behavioural Disturbance	6:1	6:1.5	1:1	3	€840
Autism/ASD	6:1	6:1.5	1:2	SENO*	€840
Physical Disability	10:1	N/A	1:1	8	€819
Multiple Disabilities	6:1	6:1.5	1:1	4	€840
Specific Learning Disability	9:1	N/A	N/A	5	€436 (<12 yrs) €650 (>12 yrs)
Specific Speech and Language Disorder	7:1	N/A	3:1	5	€819

<sup>4</sup> An enhanced capitation of €191 is payable to **post-primary schools** for students enrolled in classes for mild/moderate general learning disabilities. These students also receive the mainstream capitation rate (currently €301, i.e. a combined allocation of €492).

\*Determined by SENO in line with DES policy

### Appendix 3: NCSE Autism Seminars 2017 - 2018

ABLLS & VB MAPP (50)
Accessing the Curriculum for Students with Autism, Primary
Accessing the Curriculum for Students with Autism, Post Primary
An Introduction to Autism
An Introduction to DIR Floortime
Autism : A Sensory Perspective
Autism& Co-Occurring Additional Autism, Mental Health & Managing Anxiety
B Behaviour
Early Communication for Students with Autism (Pre or Early Verbal)
Individualised Planning for Students with Autism, Primary (40)
Individualised Planning for Students with Autism, Post Primary
Intensive Interaction (25)
LAMH Module 1&2
Language & Communication for Students with Autism in the Mainstream Classroom
Literacy, Numeracy & Autism, Primary
Literacy, Numeracy & Autism, Post Primary
Pathways to Prevention
PEP 3 Assessment Kit
4 Day Language & Communication for Students with Autism
Accessing the Curriculum for Students with Autism through Literacy
Accessing Numeracy for Students with Autism
Principals of Schools with an Existing Autism Class
Principals of Schools opening a new Autism Class, Sept 2018
Puberty, Relationships, Sexuality & Autism
Social Drama for Children & Young People with Autism
Social Skills for Students with Autism, Primary
Social Skills for Students with Autism, Post Primary
Social Stories
Supporting Students with Autism as they Transition through Education, Primary
Supporting Students with Autism as they Transition through Education, Post Primary
Teaching Young Children with Autism, aged 3 – 5 years
T-Tap (Teacch Transition Assessment Profile)
Using AFLS
2 Day Teacch
2 Day Teacch
5 Day Teacch
4 Day Introductory

## Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

**From:** National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education(NABMSE)

**Date:** 7<sup>th</sup> June 2018

**On:** The provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State.

### Who is the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education(NABMSE)?

NABMSE is the management voice of special education in Ireland. We are a school management organisation recognised by the Minister for Education and Skills and provide countrywide representation for Boards of Management of special schools and mainstream primary and post primary schools providing education for pupils with special educational needs. NABMSE represents over 200 schools.

The core purpose of NABMSE is to unite Boards of Management in special education in the Republic by providing a means for the expression of their individual and collective experience on matters affecting the education of children with special needs. Our core objectives are:

- ☐ *To promote the highest standard of education for persons with special needs.*
- ☐ *To achieve adequate deployment of resources to support education for persons with special needs.*
- ☐ *To encourage and facilitate communication and co-operation between persons engaged in the education of persons with special needs.*
- ☐ *To arrange or assist in arranging and providing conferences, discussions and meetings on subjects of general or special interest in the field of management in special education.*
- ☐ *To promote the study of best practices with regard to their impact on enhancing the abilities of persons with special needs.*

## **Introduction:**

NABMSE has been requested to make this submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on the provision of ASD and Special Classes throughout the State.

In preparation for this submission, NABMSE surveyed its members in mainstream schools and used the findings of a consultation meeting with these members in 2017. At the heart of this submission is the best interests and education of the pupil/student.

NABMSE welcomes the publication of the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme in the past week, where a new school inclusion model looks at providing the right supports at the right time to students with additional care needs. If this model is rolled out (following the pilot), it would go some way to resolving many issues identified by schools.

There also have been other recent developments in the provision of services for pupils with special education needs (SEN) such as the publication of the report of the working group on nursing supports and the progress of the Education (Admission to Schools) Bill.

While the focus of this request for submission appears to be on the provision of ASD classes in mainstream schools, it should be recognised that there are other classes that may need to be set up in mainstream schools depending on needs identified locally.

NABMSE will be focusing this submission as follows:

1. Planning for and setting up of classes
2. Training and information
3. Clinical Supports
4. Resources
5. Inclusion and Transition planning
6. Curriculum
7. Recruitment and Staffing
8. Review of placement

### **1. Planning for and setting up of special classes:**

It appears from the growth of special classes in the past few years that there has been little national planning for when and where these classes have been set up. While there are now 1,057 classes at primary level, the growth in post primary has not been at the same pace with 397 on the NCSE list for 2018/2019. While many pupils will transfer from primary mainstream, there may be no special class to assist with this transition to post primary.

Schools should be given time to plan for the proper provision of these classes including staff training thus ensuring that students are provided with appropriate education. It is essential that the whole school community - Board of Management, Principal, staff and parents/students to be supportive of the such a serious school development project. Schools that responded to our survey have reported that their schools have benefited hugely from setting up these classes and have had great success with the pupils in the classes and their inclusion in the mainstream. However, this takes support and resources to plan and deliver the services to pupils and promote inclusion.

It is essential that there is early planning for post primary provision for students with special educational needs. The identification of the location of special classes should form part of the forward planning in the DES in the same way as the need for new schools are identified.

## **2. Training and Information:**

The NCSE published Guidelines for setting up and organising special classes in 2016. While this is a welcome development, more information and assistance is required, with many schools recommending the publication of a more comprehensive document.

### **Training**

While training there is some training prior to the set up of special classes, there is a need for more training for the teacher of this class prior to and after the class set up, especially if they have no previous experience in this setting.

Special education settings have ongoing training needs which may need to be refreshed every two years e.g. manual handling, behaviour intervention, LAMH, PECS, First Aid, Emergency Medication training. This is a considerable ongoing cost for schools that currently needs to be met through fundraising or through capitation funding.

All staff working in special education should be trained to a very high and consistent standard. Whole school training is invaluable and staff assisting the pupils throughout the school day including SNAs and Bus Escorts, should also be trained to ensure that the pupil with SEN obtains the maximum benefit from the school day.

Whole school training allows for a whole school approach for pupils with special education needs and is essential for their learning.

### **Recommendations:**

- The NCSE set out a programme of training for all schools who are setting up a special class. This should include training prior to and after the setup of the class. This would give a specific training pathway to all involved in a special class and be of great benefit to the school.
- Schools should be encouraged to visit other schools who are models of good practice in the operation of special classes.
- Training and placement in special education setting should be encouraged for all initial teacher education settings at primary and post primary levels.

## **3. Clinical Supports**

Most of the schools who responded to our consultation reported that there was a serious lack of supports to the school in the areas of Psychology, Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy among others. One school stated that 'they are educating in a vacuum'. Another junior school states that 'many children are waitlisted for all their education in the school, when early intervention is key to a pupil's progress'.

We welcome the recently announced pilot project in the HSE CHO Area 7 bringing speech and language therapists and occupational therapists into schools and pre-schools. This will give a continuum of support to all schools and pupils in these pilot schools. However, the review of the pilot and the full rollout of this programme is needed.

There is also a great need for more therapists in the community to alleviate the waiting list and ensure that each child will reach their potential.

## **4. Resources**

### **Set up and ongoing costs:**

Special schools and classes have ongoing training needs mentioned above, which may need to be refreshed every two years. This is an ongoing cost for schools that currently needs to be met through fundraising or through capitation funding.

The initial costs of this type of training is very high but this training also requires regular renewal and ongoing training for newly appointed staff at a significant cost to the school.

Training in the areas of positive behaviour/crisis intervention and other areas of Health and Safety training are essential for school but are a major cost.

### **Capitation:**

Special schools and classes receive enhanced capitation grants (paid per pupil) based on the special educational needs of their students. However, this grant has been reduced over the years and does not adequately cover the needs in a special education setting. In these schools, capitation is required to cover the basic running costs of the schools such as light, heat, electricity, water rates, insurance, maintenance and educational materials.

In most special education settings, these costs are higher due to the complex and additional needs of the students.

In addition to the basic running costs, essential staff training (see training section), maintenance of specialised equipment and health/medical provisions may also have to be funded from the capitation grant.

### **Grant Aid:**

There are several grants available for setting up a special class in a mainstream setting as documented in the NCSE Guidelines. However, these have been in place for some time and may need to be reviewed to ensure that they are adequate.

### **Recommendations:**

1. An examination of capitation funding should be undertaken with a view to increasing this funding for the next school year and each year thereafter.
2. An annual training fund would be made available for each special education setting with a view to the schools identifying the training needs of their staff and procuring this training as required. This would ensure that the capitation grant would be used for the running costs of the school.
3. Examination of the adequacy of Grant Aid for setting up special classes

## 5. Inclusion and transition planning

If a pupil is attending a special class in a mainstream setting, then it should be the aim of the school to include the pupil in as many mainstream class activities as possible. This should lead to the full inclusion in mainstream where possible. However, the pupil and the school require resources to ensure that inclusion can take place with support.

Schools also report considerable challenges in the location of a suitable post primary school and ensuring that the transition of a pupil from a special class in post primary is successful.

### Recommendations:

- All schools should be encouraged to work on the NCSE Inclusive Framework to ensure that their schools are as inclusive as possible irrespective of whether they have a special class.
- NABMSE welcomes the recognition that focus on transition points on page 70 of the Programme for Government. Early transition planning should involve health and education at all 4 transition points in the education system.
- The whole area of inclusion needs a very definite strategy and one which seeks to include various government departments working together for the betterment of all.
- Inclusion and Transition planning need to be resourced and this should be considered when allocating staffing resources.

## 6. Curriculum issues

It would be essential that provision for pupils with special educational needs would be included in ALL new curriculum developments in the primary and post primary sectors.

### Post Primary programmes:

There have been very positive developments in the past few years in the education of students post 12 years, namely Junior Cycle Level Two and Level One Learning Programmes.

Junior Cycle Level Two Learning programmes have been successfully introduced in most special schools over the past two years and it's rollout is now beginning in some post primary schools.

The recent launch of the Junior Cycle Level 1 Learning programme for pupils with more complex needs is very welcome and we hope that the rollout takes place without delay.

### Review of the senior cycle:

The review of the Senior Cycle has recently commenced, and it should be noted that there are two special school and 10 post primary schools with special classes in the network of 41 schools involved in this process.

## **7. Recruitment, Staffing and support:**

All schools report that it can very difficult to recruit properly trained staff for the special class and it is often the newly qualified teacher who is recruited to teach in the class. It is essential that all staff are trained to enable them to teach pupils with special educational needs to allow them to teach in the special class and to allow for inclusion in the mainstream classes where possible. This training should start in Initial Teacher Education.

While we have recommended a programme of training, we are aware that obtaining substitute teachers has been very difficult in the past few years which has influenced the ability to attend essential training.

Where the Principal is teaching, the special education teacher and the teacher(s) in the special class are not calculated in the Principal release days.

Many teachers who are teaching in special classes can feel isolated especially in schools where there is only one special class and there are very few teachers with this experience in the school.

### **Recommendations:**

- Some schools have suggested during our consultation that there should be a minimum of two special classes set up in a school. This would have the effect of supporting both teachers and allowing the school to cater for all abilities and ages of pupils within the student cohort.
- Consideration should be given to including all teachers in the school when allocating principal release days
- Consideration could be given to the number of special classes in the school when allocating management resources(DES)
- There are many areas of the country where support groups have been set up by individual school principals to support all special education settings in their area. These groups serve as an important resource to schools and should be encouraged in more areas by NCSE or Teacher Education Centres.

## **8. Review of placement**

Schools who set up special classes want to provide the best resources and education to their pupils and are very disappointed when a placement does not work despite all efforts. However, sometimes it may not be in the best interest of the pupil to continue in the school.

Any review of placement should not be undertaken lightly, and all efforts should be made to support the placement. However, if placements need to be reviewed, schools need support and assistance in the review of this placement.

The submission identifies the relevant issues and looks at some recommendations for a way forward for supporting the establishment of special classes in mainstream schools.

NABMSE welcomes the opportunity to work with the Joint Oireachtas Committee and all the education partners in finding a resolution for the issues identified.

## Submission for the Joint Committee on Education & Skills

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### Appendix 1

The HSE provides services for individuals with Autism from childhood to adulthood either directly or through a range of voluntary service providers. There are different types of service providers which include;

- Service providers who provide autism specific services.
- Service providers who provide combined services to people with autism and other disabilities.

These services include assessment, diagnosis and on-going treatment and intervention supports. On-going interventions and supports may include home support services, respite services and multi-disciplinary team supports to assess the individual needs of each child and provide or arrange for the provision of appropriate interventions.

#### ***Progressing Disability Services for Children & Young People (0-18 years)***

In respect of children with disabilities, including children with autism, a key priority for 2018 is the continued roll out of the *Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People Programme (PDS)*, a reconfiguration of all HSE and HSE funded children's disability services into geographically-based Children's Disability Network Teams (Early-Intervention and School-aged or 0-18 Teams). This Programme aims to achieve a national equitable approach in service provision for all children based on their individual need and regardless of their disability, where they live or where they go to school. Based on the recommendations of the *Report of the National Reference Group on Multidisciplinary Services for Children aged 5-18 Years (2009)*, its objectives are:

- ✓ One clear pathway to services providing equity of access for all children with disabilities, according to their need.
- ✓ Effective teams working with partnership with parents and Education to support children in achieving their potential.
- ✓ Available resources used to the optimum benefit for children and their families.

#### ***Current Status:***

Fifty six Children's Disability Network Teams have already been established with a further eighty two Children's Disability Network Teams to be reconfigured from existing services in 2018.

Please note that **all** HSE Areas planning reconfiguration continue to have significant Early Intervention and School Age Services in place, provided either directly by the HSE, including Beechpark Autism Services, or by voluntary service providers funded by the HSE, such as Enable Ireland, Kare, Muriosa Foundation, St. John of God Services, Brothers of Charity Services, St. Michael's House, Cope Foundation, CRC, Daughters of Charity Services etc.

The intention is to roll out an integrated care model that will allow children, whatever the nature of their disability, to be seen as locally to their home and school as possible; at primary care level when their needs can be met there and by a network specialist interdisciplinary team if their needs are more complex. The primary and network teams will be supported as appropriate by specialist support services with a high level of expertise in particular fields. National HSE Disability and Primary Care are working together collaboratively with Community Health Organisations via their Chief Officers to support implementation of the HSE's National Policy on Access to Services for Children with a Disability or Developmental Delay. This policy will provide a single point of entry, signposting parents and referrers to the most appropriate service (Primary Care for non-complex functional difficulties and Children's Disability Network Teams for complex functional difficulties).

Since 2014, the roll out of the *Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young People (0-18s) Programme* has entailed targeted investment of €14m and the provision of 275 additional therapy staff, to increase services for children with all disabilities.

These measures will have a positive impact on the provision of clinical services for all children, including children with Autism, requiring access to health related supports.

### **AIM (Access and Inclusion Model)**

There is a National structure to underpin this change management programme with National, Regional and Local Implementation Groups in place. All elements of the implementation structure include multi stakeholder involvement including representatives from the Department of Education and its relevant service strands including the National Educational Psychology Service and the National Council for Special Education.

In this context, the HSE works with other non-Health agencies such as Education (e.g., the National Educational Psychological Services [NEPS]) to ensure that services will operate in a more integrated manner to meet service user's needs in a more timely and seamless manner.

A good example of this is the AIM (Access and Inclusion Model), which was launched in June 2016, following publication of the Report *Supporting Access to Early Childhood and Education for Children with a disability* in November 2015 by the Interdepartmental Group comprising of DCYA, DES and DOH and their agencies. The vision of AIM is that all children, including children with a disability, shall be able to meaningfully access and participate in the ECCE programme in mainstream pre-school settings (apart from exceptional situations where specialised provision is valid for reasons unavoidable).

AIM recognises that children with disabilities are a diverse group with needs that can vary from mild to moderate to severe or complex with different functional abilities and requirements for support. AIM takes a strengths based approach, based on identifying the abilities and support needs of the children. AIM is a 7 step model to support inclusion, ranging from universal supports (Levels 1-3) for all children with a disability to targeted supports (Levels 4-7) for children with complex needs arising from a disability.

Children who require therapeutic intervention to ensure their participation in pre-schools can have their needs addressed in a number of ways; it does not always require one to one sessions with the child in the pre-school room. Successful interventions include:-

1. provision of information, advice packs and practical guidelines to assist children, parents and pre-school leaders with common areas of challenge
2. training of parents or pre-school leaders (either in one to one or group sessions) to understand the child's needs and to respond appropriately
3. the provision of a customised programme or strategy in the local health centre to assist the pre-school leader respond to specific needs or behaviours
4. professional advice and support on the phone or by email
5. one to one working with the child and pre-school leader in the pre-school setting
6. screening of a pre-school group

Health service supports for children with a disability to enable them to access and participate in their ECCE programme as part of their overall Disability Services supports, are usually provided by the same clinicians, as part of a multi-disciplinary team. These clinicians include Physiotherapists (PT), Occupational Therapists (OT), Speech and Language Therapists (SLT) and Psychologists and are usually employed in children's disability services for 0-18 or 0-6 age groups to support all children who meet the service's access criteria and this includes supporting relevant children to access their ECCE programme.

## Therapy Supports

Currently there are in excess of circa 3,305 primary schools and circa 140 special education schools in Ireland. Within available resources, HSE funded therapy services work with children attending these schools as part of their caseloads in addition to providing consultative and educational /advisory interventions to teaching staff where resources permit. For example, in the area of Speech and Language Therapy, there are a number of specific projects of Speech and Language Therapy and schools working together to facilitate language and literacy attainments. For example, in September 2010, the Department of Education and Skills (DES), the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Dublin City Children's Services Committee (DC CSC) initiated a classroom-based language intervention programme to support language and literacy skills in a DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) school. This classroom-based collaborative programme was provided for 48 senior infant children, in 2 senior infants classes, by 2 HSE Speech and Language Therapists and 2 classroom teachers. The teachers and Speech and Language Therapists collaboratively planned a language-rich programme explicitly targeting skills in phonological awareness, narrative and vocabulary skills based on the strong research evidence of the importance of these factors for literacy development, as well as evidence of the effectiveness of interventions targeting these areas. The teachers and therapists implemented the programme together with the whole class one morning per week. The teachers continued elements of the programme within teaching lessons for the remainder of the week.

In Ballymun, the Youngballymun project is co-funded by Government and the Atlantic Philanthropies through the Area Based Childhood Programme to tackle poverty and to measurably improve learning and wellbeing outcomes for children in Ballymun and to inform practice and policy nationally. Youngballymun currently second a Senior Speech and Language Therapist from the HSE to work collaboratively with local schools, community groups and families. The focus is on a universal approach towards language development from early infancy to adolescence, including all primary school pupils. Teachers and schools are supported through existing structures and practices to build on the focus of the importance of language development, and help ensure better outcomes for all pupils.

In 2011, the Happy Talk project was devised in response to a high level of need in the area of Speech, Language, Communication Needs among children aged 0-6 years living in The Glen and Mayfield in Cork City. Originally funded under the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) and by Tomar Trust, Happy Talk was supported from 2011 – 2016 by lead agency (and employer) Cork City Partnership and by Cork City Council, HSE, Tusla and the local primary schools. The Happy Talk Consortium is made up of these agencies along with Barnardos, Cork City Childcare Company, UCC, Cork Education and Training Board and a representative from local schools. Since 2016 Happy Talk has been funded by the HSE and Tomar Trust. In 2017, it moved from Cork City Partnership to the HSE, as lead agency and employer.

The HSE has been involved in Happy Talk since the beginning of the project in 2011, taking an active role in the work of Happy Talk at each stage. The Happy Talk team is made up of one senior speech and language therapist and three staff grade speech and language therapists working across Cork City. The Happy Talk team has extended its service and is now in all DEIS schools in Cork City. It's in more than 85 schools, preschools, crèches, libraries, parent toddler groups and public health nurse/baby clinics.

Happy Talk works in The Glen, Mayfield, Blackpool, Farranree, Mahon, Ballyphehane, Togher, Greenmount, Glasheen and Cork City Centre. The Happy Talk team work in partnership with their HSE colleague in Primary Care Speech and Language Therapy, with parents and families, teachers, early years' educators, librarians, public health nurses and lots of community based partners.

Happy Talk is now well known in the targeted areas of the City, liked and respected among all stakeholders who are engaged with it, especially parents, teachers, early years practitioners and community groups and activists. Raising awareness of the importance of literacy and oral language development among parents in disadvantaged areas is likely to have a long-term impact on educational outcomes.

## **Speech and Language Therapy & Occupational Therapy Pilot Programme (HSE CHO 7)**

In May 2018, the Government launched a new project to bring specialised therapists into schools and pre-schools and which is supported by the HSE.

The project will be managed and co-ordinated by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and the model has been developed by the Departments of Education, Children and Youth Affairs and Health and is part of the government's overall aim to help every child to fulfil their full potential.

The pilot is located in the HSE administrative area of CHO 7 (Kildare, West Wicklow, South City, Dublin South West). The purpose of the project is to test a model of tailored therapeutic supports that allow for early intervention in terms of providing speech and language and occupational therapy within 'educational settings'. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that this innovative pilot will also complement existing HSE funded provision of essential therapy services within each of the nine Community Healthcare Organisations.

150 schools and pre-schools will test the model in Phase 1 of the project, which will take place over the course of the 2018/2019 school year. The project has been developed in conjunction with the Health Service Executive (HSE). €2.25m is being allocated to Phase One of the project in 2018.

As part of the programme, 19 speech and language therapists and 12 Occupational Therapists will be recruited by the HSE to work with the 150 schools and pre-schools. The NCSE will also recruit 2 National Co-ordinators to manage the project.

Phase one of the project will focus on:

- Early intervention and tailored supports.
- Bringing specialised therapists into schools and pre-schools to provide tailored support to children.
- Collaboration and greater linkages between therapists, parents, teachers and other school and pre-school staff.
- Developing greater linkages between educational and therapy supports.
- Providing professional training and guidance for school and pre-school staff and parents in supporting children's therapy and developmental needs.
- Maximising the participation of parents in their children's communication development.

The pilot will include a full range of school types, reflective of the overall educational system. This will include:

- Schools with significant levels of educational disadvantage.
- A mixture of urban, large, and small schools.
- Schools with high levels of support needs as identified under the new special education teaching allocation model.
- Mainstream schools which have special classes
- Special schools with significant levels of therapy support needs.

Pre-school settings associated with primary schools participating in the project are being included in order to provide for therapy interventions to be made at the earliest possible time and to create linkages between pre-school and primary school provision.



Submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills in relation to the provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State.

7<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Special Needs Parents Association exists to support all parents of persons with special needs and disabilities irrespective of age or diagnosis, by promoting on a national level, improved treatment, education, welfare and acceptance for our children.

In the context of this submission, we endeavour to provide a platform for parent voices who are the primary advocates for their children. Several themes emerged from parent's feedback that is consistent with previous reviews conducted by the National Council for Special Education during their review of special schools and special classes in 2011 and Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools 2015.

### **Designation of Special Class**

While the majority of input has been from parents of children with autism, we would also highlight that there is some demand from parents for more mixed ability special classes at second level to encourage the progression of children with other types of disabilities to continue to participate in a mainstream school environment where possible and provide a continuum of special educational provision between mainstream and special class settings.

*"I want to educate my child locally and do not understand why our area is are so ill served".* Parent West Dublin area

*"The composition of special classes should be determined in response to the needs of children with special educational needs within particular local communities, taking into account local demographics and the ongoing feasibility of maintaining the special class. Council recognises that there are advantages to having special classes with a specific designation and*

*'mixed' base classes.*" The Future Role of Special Schools and Classes in Ireland NCSE 2011

*"The need for autism specific special schools and more special education school/class in Westmeath is huge. Parents of children with more complex needs, those with a dual diagnosis of asd and intellectual disability and/or global developmental delay. Parents are being told that units won't be able to care properly for their children. The local special school has a 2 year wait if not longer. And the local autism specific special school has a wait list twice the capacity of the school."* Parent

*"The provision of ASD classes in Wicklow was vitally important to me, his sole carer, throughout the past 10 years. I underwent a long hard struggle, in accessing both ASD classes and NEPS alike. This caused great stress and strain on my own health and anxiety and distress to him mentally. The impact of this and long years and the unnecessary battles to get access to an appropriate educational setting for him have taken their toll".* Parent

Some parent of children with disabilities other than autism feel that while their child progressed with support throughout primary school, the post primary school environment proved too difficult and the only available option was to transfer to a special school as the preferred option of remaining in the post primary school in a special class was unavailable. Special schools are geographically spread out and this results in a child travelling long distances and reducing opportunities to maintain peer relationships in their own community.

*"School applications stating they do not take children with a moderate ID (Intellectual Disability). This is discrimination and again comes down to lack of training. Schools claim to be inclusive however this is not the case as my son was refused by 3 schools based on his moderate ID & now without a school place for Sept."* Parent

### **Lack of ASD Classes in Post Primary Schools**

*"There is a chronic shortage of places for children with autism in autism classes in schools. This is especially prevalent in second level where the number of class spaces is about ¼ of that at primary level where there are also black spots. There is legislation going through the Oireachtas at present (Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill) that could solve this problem."* Inclusion Ireland, Note on Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill 2016.

In May 2018, the Amendment to Education (Admission to Schools) Bill 2016 was approved by Government giving the Minister through the National Council for Special Education the power to compel a school to

open a special class where it has been identified that a need exists. The NCSE also will have the power to designate a school for a particular child where no places exist.

Parents have been very vocal for some time highlighting the lack of provision in certain geographic areas and at post primary level.

*"I have a young son with moderate ASD who is currently in mainstream with supports. I am unsure if this is the best place for him at present but feel I have very little choice. There are only six primary ASD places in the whole of the Dublin 6/6w area and none at second level. I have calculated that there are approximately 7000 primary students enrolled in the D6/D6W area and yet there are only six places at primary level in St. Clare's. I have contacted all ASD units in our surrounding area and they are full with large waiting lists. On examining the NCSE's list of special classes you will note that Dublin 6/6w has the least amount of ASD classes in the Dublin area. I do not understand this especially since some primary schools in our local area have had extensions completed recently. There are a number of large boys national schools in the area again with no units attached and this is unusual considering the increased prevalence of ASD in boys".* Parent

*"Only one secondary school in my area (Drogheda) with dedicated provision for children with ASD diagnosis. This catapults most of those in need of this support directly into either special schools or mainstream, neither of which adequately meets their needs."* Parent

A continuum of educational options is essential at second level and where possible, the special class should be viewed as a base by which the post primary pupil can revert to as part of the range of supports to access mainstream education and not solely remain in a special class for the duration of their school experience.

### **Teacher and Special Needs Assistants Training and Core Professional Development**

While parents primarily draw attention to the availability of special classes in different parts of the country, it is extremely important to engage in discussions as to the quality of educational provision in special classes and the outcomes for the children attending a special class.

*"Teachers working in the units should be trained properly and have knowledge and understanding of pupils with ASD and other special needs. And they should want to work with the students and have an interest in them."* Parent

*"Proper teacher training is paramount. There should be a pool of teachers who are ASD trained. It is a lottery if you get a teacher that has any*

*experience/ training in ASD. I think the lack of training also contributes to extra stress on the teachers and therefore they leave the unit and it's back to square one again."* Parent

*"Lack of staff training for teachers teaching in a unit. There is a serious lack of education on how the children should be managed. There are too many parents been phoned to come & take their child home because the child is not cooperating. This is not the answer; more teacher training needs to be done. Completing a module in their degree is not enough they need to have a few months experience before been considered to work in an ASD unit".* Parent

*"The area needs more units and units that are well equipped with teachers and SNAs who are properly trained in ASD".* Parent

*"Many post-primary teachers consider they are not adequately equipped to work with these students either in mainstream or special classes."*

NCSE Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools 2015.

### **Special Classes in Private Schools**

It has to be noted that in South Dublin in particular, there is a high concentration of private post primary schools which reduces parents over all options for selecting a public post primary school. This is not a phenomenon specific to children with special needs. However, children with special educational needs are impacted in the cases where a parent chooses to or has to due to local circumstances enrol their child in private school and the school is not funded to cater for the continuum of their special educational needs. In previous years, private schools have been criticised for not enrolling or perceived to not be catering to the needs of children with special educational needs.

*"To what extent are fee-paying schools creating "soft barriers" to admitting children with ASD? And, if these do exist, to what extent are SENOs challenging same?"* Parent

*"What possible justification is there for this policy (especially given the overall shortage of such places, and the particular impact of such policies on children in areas like Dublin 2/4/6/6w/8 where the prevalence of fee-paying schools means that there is not a single ASD Special Class available in this large swathe of the city)? Will the Department seek to review and change this policy forthwith? Will the Department actively incentivise the establishment of such classes in fee-paying schools? Has the Department received any expressions of interest in the setting up of such classes from any fee-paying schools?"* Parent

### **Additional Support for Pupils in Special Classes**

*"We need to get him reassessed as he was 4 years old and practically non-verbal when he was diagnosed. No doubt the HSE won't have the resources to provide this despite knowing that he will need it for the past 8 years. I'm already worried sick about getting an appropriate place for him in a local school."* Parent

The insufficient number of National Educational Psychologists and major shortages of therapists to support a child to access the curriculum and whole school environment, including the social aspects, is well documented and has been raised repeatedly in all of our previous submissions and oral presentations to the Education Committee.

*"In 2014, as recommended by the SENO, I began to plan for secondary. I already had guessed, it was clear my son would need a high level of support. I went on a 3 year waiting list for a NEPS assessment at his primary school to see what options he had, and each year was informed that only 2-3 NEPS assessments were available".* Parent

Instead of improvements in health-related supports, waiting lists for provision of services continue to rise and can have a detrimental impact **on the child's developmental potential and the for the school staff who** need guidance and support from external professionals. Despite promises to roll out **Children's Disability Network Teams under the national policy of 'Progressing Disability Services for Children and Young Persons 0-18'**, there has been no investment over the past two years to recruit additional therapists in the HSE Service Plan. The last team was established in 2014 and less than a third of all proposed teams are operating around the country. It is doing a major disservice to children and the schools trying to meet their educational needs, to not adequately provide the therapeutic interventions to ensure that children will have better outcomes in the long-term when they progress to further training, education and employment.

*"The Government should provide for sufficient ring-fenced resources to ensure that the HSE is in a position to provide adequate multidisciplinary supports for students with complex special educational needs, including ASD, who require such supports to access education."* Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools – NCSE Policy Advice 2015

It is welcome news that the NCSE appear to be circumventing the funding blockages in the HSE and Department of Health by seeking additional funding via the Department of Education to establish a school based SLT and OT therapy service to support schools and individual pupils with additional needs. However, government needs to ensure that both policies

are supported with finding and ensure that they operate complimentary to each other.

## **Home Tuition versus Provision of Special Classes**

The Home Tuition Scheme is supposed to be viewed as a temporary measure when no suitable place is available for a child or their medical needs are such that being educated in a school environment is not suitable. However, there is a financial and educational cost to the scheme. While the financial cost of operating the scheme may be known to the Department of Education, the educational cost and outcomes are less well established.

It would also be useful to know the categories and rational for children currently availing of the Home Tuition Scheme and what number of those relate to the lack of availability of special classes.

*"There is no database for children on Home Tuition that need a school place. All the kids in every county & area should be put onto a list by the local SENO and when a place becomes available in a unit or special school (depending on recommendation) it should be given to the next child waiting on the list instead of Principals hand picking what children they want in their school. Can a suggestion be made to get a list or a register done for each SENO which would mean they have control over the situation and there are not kids that are 6 & 7 with no school place".*

Parent

Parents also wish to establish is there any data on the proportion of children of school going age no longer attending secondary school who have ASD? What proportion of children with ASD are receiving support for home tuition? Is there any data on the importance of non-academic social benefits of school attendance for children with ASD? Is there any data on the relative future achievement (in employment / third level) of children attending ASD Special Class versus children home-schooled / out of school?

We would like to take the opportunity to thank all of the parents who contributed to this submission and to the Committee for giving us the **opportunity to channel parent's perspectives.**



**Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education & Skills in relation to the shortage of Autism Classes at Primary & Secondary School**

**Introduction**

We would like to thank the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills for exploring the shortages of autism classes, particularly at 2<sup>nd</sup> level, and for inviting our organisation to make a submission in this regard.

AsIAM is a national autism advocacy organisation which is working to build a more inclusive Ireland for autistic people. A key aspect of our work is training and supporting organisations, including school communities, in increasing their accessibility for autistic people and listening to the voice of the autism community. The organisation was founded by Adam Harris, based on his own experiences going through the schools system as a person on the autism spectrum and also benefits from the insights and guidance of our Youth Leadership Team – 15 young autistic people, from across Ireland, who advise us on our work.

In recent years in Ireland, many schools have become more welcoming and inclusive environments for autistic students, indeed 86% of autistic students attend mainstream school, either in an autism class or in mainstream class. However whilst the system may have become more “aware” of autistic students – inclusion remains far from universal. Many students continue to experience soft barriers in accessing a school of their choice whilst countless more experience discrimination and a lack of understanding during their time in school. This can have disastrous consequences for both the student and their family, not only during their school years but indeed in later life. We know anecdotally that many students with autism experience school refusal – in which due to anxiety and stress a student falls out of school or ceases to attend – losing access to supports and their daily routine as a consequence.

This is especially true at second level. Whilst many primary schools have opened autism classes and adapted their culture – it seems the conversation around inclusion has taken longer at second-level, with a severe shortage of second level autism classes in many areas of the country. As an organisation, we have been working hard to improve autism understanding and accessibility at second-level – we have recently partnered with the Joint Managerial Body and are developing a resource for schools who wish to open an autism class and/or improve their practises towards autism generally. This will include a free online training module for teachers and a framework for schools which will define “autism-friendly practise”. We look forward to launching this resource in Autumn 2018 and cooperating with the sector in advancing the cause of universal acceptance and accessibility for autistic students.

**Need for greater number of autism classes**

As more children on the autism spectrum age out of the primary school's system who have benefited from access to an autism class, there is a real need for the secondary schools across Ireland to establish autism classes.

Presently, many families are experiencing difficulty accessing an autism class in their local area. Indeed, many autistic students are asked to travel long distances from their local community – adding to the length of their day, increasing stress, anxiety and sensory overload and also undermining the purpose of mainstreaming policy, to enable students to grow up in their own community and flourish alongside their peers.

In some geographic areas, there has been a particular shortage. Due to the pressure of league tables, which paint a one dimensional view of the education system in the media, many Principals in competitive areas with a large numbers of schools are reluctant to establish autism classes for fear of it impacting the percentage of students from the school who advance to third level. There is also a concern of being “labelled” as inclusive – this is where one school locally steps forward and acts inclusively and the others step back signposting all prospective autistic students to that school, even if it is not the school that their family would usually attend.

These soft barriers are daily realities for autistic students. As an organisation, we strongly support the NCSE being given the power to compel schools to open autism classes where they are required. Whilst it is a journey we want schools to opt-in to because it benefits everyone in the school community, we feel where this does not happen that the NCSE must be in a position to vindicate the rights of an autistic student to attend a school of their choice.

### **Need to improve quality of autism classes & educational provision for students on the autism spectrum**

As an organisation, we strongly believe every autistic student should have the opportunity to attend a school of their choice. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities takes a clear view that it is the obligation of member states to make mainstream schools inclusive – not for students with disabilities to fit a system which does not meet their needs. In many instances support in mainstream class can enable students to attend their local school however some students require further support and a lower pupil-teacher ratio. We therefore believe that in order for schools to be truly inclusive of all students with autism they must be willing to open an autism class upon the request not only of the NCSE but local families of autistic students who wish to attend a particular school. We do not believe our community should face any barrier to access other than the standard enrolment policies facing all students.

That said, we wish to emphasise that there is more to this issue than the provision of autism classes. Indeed in recent years large numbers of autism classes have been opened around the state but often with a severe lack of quality control or appropriate training for staff. To that end, we would urge the committee to consider the quality of offering currently in place and the NCSE Policy Advice on Supporting Students with Autism, particularly in relation to access to training for teachers who are assigned to autism classes and the need for this training to be compulsory. Furthermore we would recommend that:

To that end, AsIAM recommends that in addition to increased numbers of autism classes it is vital to ensure that:

**We use the right language:** Autism classes are autism classes. In recent times the word “unit” (which is not an official term) has been used more and more in the

schools system. It medicalises the support on offer and creates a stigma within the schools system.

**Greater range of supports:** In order for students on the autism spectrum to reach their personal potential in the education system it is important that they can access bespoke supports which meet their individual needs such as SNA access, therapeutic supports or additional teaching time. It is important the support provided is in line with the wishes and needs of the student and does not stigmatise or isolate the individual.

**Teacher and SNA are suitably qualified and trained:** Despite 86% of autistic children now attending mainstream school (either in a mainstream class or autism classes) and 1 in 65 students in the education system having a diagnosis of autism, knowledge and training of teachers in the area remains low. Whilst some teachers have undertaken advanced training in the area and the Middletown Centre for Autism provides exceptional learning opportunities for teachers, the vast majority still do not access these opportunities.

As autism is a distinct condition and autistic people often think in quite a counter-intuitive manner, it is vital that teachers receive autism training as part of Initial Teacher Education and are suitably up-skilled through continuous professional development throughout their careers.

SNAs often play a vital role in meeting the additional care needs of autistic students in the education system and yet require no formal training in the area and indeed do not have access to any training

**Whole-School communities are educated:** In order to meaningfully include autistic students it is vital that everyone in a school community understands and respects difference. All teachers in the school (not just those in the autism class) will interact and teach students from the autism class so it is vital they access an appropriate level of training. Ancillary staff will come into contact with the students and so they must too be trained. Students and all parents in the school should also be educated to celebrate different ways of thinking as part of the overall diversity programme in the school.

**Meaningful inclusion takes place:** All autism classes should be fully integrated into the life of the school – with students accessing the whole curriculum (in line with their own needs and abilities), extracurricular activities and peer group. Just as autistic students should be included in mainstream activities, so too should neurotypical peers have the opportunity to visit and get to know the autism class facilities.

**Appropriate policies and procedures are put in place:** School policies must be inclusive of autistic students and autism-proofed or run the risk of excluding or targeting autistic students. It is vital, for example, that a distinction is made in policy between autistic behaviours and negative behaviour.

**Appropriate clinical supports are accessible:** It is to be warmly welcomed when autistic students access the mainstream schools system, however too often this is at the expense of accessing clinical expertise which historically would have existed in the special schools system. It is vital interventions such as speech and language therapy, occupational therapy and psychological support are available in the mainstream schools system.

**We plan for the future:** Additional supports in the education system must ensure that students can duly progress to a meaningful adult life. This requires support in transition planning, practical life skills and self-advocacy training. We must ensure we plan for adulthood with students whilst they are still in the education system.