

# **Provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools throughout the State**

## **Opening statement by National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education**

**To**

### **Joint Committee on Education and Skills**

**26<sup>th</sup> June 2018**

We would like to thank the members of the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for affording us the opportunity to give the views of our members – schools involved in the education of pupils with special educational needs.

#### **Introduction:**

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, 40% of whom are mainstream primary and post primary schools.

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.

We welcome the recent publication of the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme, 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 statement 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.

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**

While training there is some training prior to the setup 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 significant training needs which may need to be refreshed every two years e.g. manual handling, behaviour intervention, LAMH, PECS, First Aid, Emergency Medication training.

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.

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 considerable ongoing costs for schools that currently needs to be met through fundraising or through capitation funding.

### **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 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, 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.

### **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 is 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 provision**

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 the recently launched Level One Learning Programmes.

It is important that the rollout of these Learning programmes 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 enable 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.

### **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 for the pupil despite all efforts.

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.

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