

Joint Committee on Education and Skills
Provision of ASD and Special Classes in Mainstream Schools
Initial Opening Statement from Teresa Griffin, CEO
National Council for Special Education

28th June 2018

1. Introduction

Thank you for inviting the NCSE here today. At this point, I will highlight just a few points from the written submission forwarded to you recently.

2. Role of NCSE

The NCSE has a number of responsibilities in relation to special classes – we

- establish special classes in line with DES policy;
- allocate teaching and SNA support to those classes;
- provide professional development for teachers and principals with special classes; and
- undertake research and provide policy advice to the Minister.

3. So what have we done so far?

In recent years, the NCSE has worked with many, many schools and has sanctioned substantial numbers of special classes. From 39 classes in 2001 to 1,454 open in the next school year. 73% are in primary schools. 27% are in post-primary schools. 82% are for students with ASD.

Opening a special class happens in two ways. One way is where a SENO identifies the need for such a class in an area and approaches all schools in the district to see which would be willing to open such a class. The other way is when a school contacts a SENO and requests sanction for a class. We have developed school information booklet on opening a special class and parental information leaflets on transitioning to and from special settings.

There are a small number of situations where it has not proved possible to obtain school agreement to open a special class or where schools wish to take more time to consider opening a special class. The reasons for the school's decision can vary – from lack of appropriate accommodation to concern about a perceived inadequacy in resources provided to schools. At present, the final decision rests with the Board of Management.

The NCSE therefore welcomes the provisions set out in the Education (Admissions to Schools) Bill which gives the Minister the authority to – after a process – direct that a special class be opened.

I wish to highlight three particular findings from some recent policy advice as they relate to special classes. The NCSE considers that:

1. The purpose of special classes needs to be further clarified – some schools consider that special classes are resourced only to cater for more able students with ASD.
2. The current special class model may not be the most suitable for post-primary students and we want to do some more work around this issue.
3. NCSE research has found that students, once enrolled in special schools or classes, rarely re-enrol in mainstream education. In addition, their level of inclusion in mainstream classes and access to the full curriculum may be limited.

NCSE is working with the DES on these issues. Improving how we plan for the short, medium and long-term physical infrastructure and school transport is being considered in a short-acting joint DES/NCSE working group.

The broader issues will be considered as part of a further piece of policy analysis and work will commence on this aspect later this year.

In the meantime, our developing **NCSE Support Service** will continue to provide professional development and in-school support for teachers of students with special educational needs in mainstream and special settings, including those with ASD.

I am happy now to take further questions from the Committee.