



Special Needs
Parents Association
SNPA Bringing Parents Together

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.

7th 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 rationale 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.