

INTO Oral Submission to The Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

The Delivery of services for students with Down syndrome

The INTO thanks the Oireachtas for the opportunity to be here as representatives for over 35,000 primary teachers in the south of Ireland.

Currently children with Down syndrome attend both special and mainstream schools. Their educational placement is determined by their needs and by the choice of their parents. The learning ability of children with Down syndrome varies from severe and profound general learning disability to mild general learning disability. Therefore, the learning needs of children with Down syndrome also vary. Children with Down syndrome who attend special schools are in classes of approximately 6 to 8 pupils. Children with Down syndrome in mainstream schools could be in classes of 30 pupils or more and usually receive additional support from the learning support / special education team. The INTO is of the view that educational provision for children with Down Syndrome should be on a continuum depending on unique needs.

The greatest lacuna in support for children with special educational needs, including children with Down syndrome, is the lack of therapy supports. Children with special educational needs often require speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, or other supports such as behavioural therapy, counselling. The INTO welcomes the piloting of a model for providing school-based therapy services. Not all children with Down syndrome required additional therapies, but when they do, these supports should be available, regardless of whether the children attend special or mainstream schools.

The Special Education Support Service (SESS), now part of NCSE provide professional development opportunities for teachers in the area of special education. While the SESS provide very valuable and high-quality professional development it is insufficient. In addition to courses and seminars, there is a need to develop in-school sustained support. All newly qualified teachers have studied special and inclusive education as part of their initial teacher education courses, but it is important that teachers have opportunities throughout their careers to continue their learning and development in the area of special education. The certificate and diploma courses provided by colleges of education / university schools of education are highly regarded, but are only accessible to teachers in special education posts. Given the policy focus on inclusion, all teachers should have access to certificate and diploma level courses in special education.

The July provision scheme is very valuable educationally for children with severe and profound general learning disabilities and for children with ASD as it enables continuity, and allows for as little interruption as possible in the education of children who require stability and consistency. However, the fact that July provision is confined to children with severe and profound general learning disabilities and children with ASD is seen as excluding other children with learning disabilities, such

as children with Down syndrome. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE 2015) in its policy advice on the education of children with ASD recommended that July provision be reviewed. There are many practical issues to be addressed regarding July provision, such as who should be entitled to additional educational provision during the summer, what the nature of summer educational programmes supported by the State should be, and practical arrangements pertaining to curriculum, employment and location. The INTO welcomes the proposal to review July provision, both its operation and its purpose.

Children with Down syndrome thrive in schools, whether special or mainstream, where teachers have been afforded the opportunity to avail of appropriate professional development in relation to the education of children with Down syndrome and where suitable supports are in place.