

Special Needs Parents Association opening statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education and Skills in relation to Reduced Timetables

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, I would like to thank you for the invitation to present on this issue today. This is not the first time that we have referenced this issue with the committee, but it is the first time that the sole focus of these proceedings is to examine the issue.

The issue of reduced timetables has been brought to the attention of the Department of Education and Skills and the National Council for Special Education over previous years, but little by way of data is available on how prevalent the use of reduced timetables is in our educational settings.

The latest figures from Tusla indicate that 117,000 post primary pupils have missed 20 or more school days in the last school year. We have no idea how significant the figure is for reduced timetables or whether there are some schools adopting this approach more frequently than others. All the evidence we have is primarily anecdotal from parents contacting us where the situation is imposed on them by a school.

Tusla do not proactively engage early on when their children are restricted from accessing the school environment and curriculum by the school, but will take action against parents when they are deemed responsible for restricting access. Tusla have indicated that there is no legislation to support the use of reduced timetables and the constitutionality of imposing a reduced timetable is questionable.

The main reasons we have experienced to date are where a school has told the parent that they do not have the required resources, in particular an SNA to cater for the child's needs and the child's access to school is limited to availability of support. This is often in contention with the opinion of the SENO when contacted by the parent and thus, the child is stuck in the middle of conflicting opinions and loses out educationally and socially.

In a similar circumstance, a child's behaviour is typically the primary reason cited. There is an ongoing question of, is an SNA the most appropriate support for a child where behavioural management is required. Minister McHugh has stated that reduced timetables should not be used as a behavioural management technique, or as a de facto suspension or expulsion.

Article 24 (2) (a) (b) and (d) of the UNCRPD stipulates that 'children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education on the basis of disability'..... and 'Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education'.

Article 30 (5) (d) of the UNCRPD provides that States Parties should 'ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school'.

The cost of reduced timetables on parents, as well as emotional is of particular concern in relation to risks to employment and this is rarely a consideration of the school when imposing reduced timetables.

In conclusion, the use of reduced timetables should be; of last resort, time bound, reported to the Department, monitored, trigger a multi-agency response and involve a holistic review and response to the impact and risks associated with a reduced timetable for both the child and family.