



May 2019

**Adam Harris (Founder-CEO, AsIAM) Opening Statement to the Oireachtas
Joint Committee on Education and Skills Consultation on Reduced Timetable**

- I want to begin by thanking the members for their invitation to our organisation to present here today and for shining a light on the issue of reduced timetables. Reduced timetables are a daily reality for many vulnerable students and, yet, from the perspective of the State, there has been a certain culture of “don’t ask, don’t tell” with devastating consequences for young people of various minority groups, and our families. I hope that your work will challenge the practise, hold people to account and bring about real change
- AsIAM is Ireland’s National Autism Charity. We undertake a range of activities with the aim of bringing about an autism-friendly Ireland. Presently, we feel, that the autism community is at something of a cross-roads. Ireland, on the surface, is more aware and more inclusive than it has ever been. Indeed, when I was a young child very few autistic children attended mainstream school. We are now in a position that 86% of autistic students attend such schools (in either autism classes or mainstream classes). This is of course to be welcomed however permission to enter a building is not, in and of itself, inclusion. It is very easy for us to pat ourselves on the back and think we are doing a great job without really scrutinising the lived experiences of many autistic young people in our education system.
- On a day to day basis our young people adapt to a way of communicating, thinking and doing which is not their own. From a young age, experiences such as getting the bus, going to the supermarket or sitting in a classroom require problem solving, adaptation and a large degree of stress and anxiety. It is a matter of both national and international law the principle that every aspect of society should be fully inclusive and accessible for all citizens however autism accessibility is far from a universal reality in our education system. Many autistic students are asked to communicate with those who are not trained to share in that communication, are asked to sit in environments which cause severe overload and suffering, are asked to participate in learning and social activities which are not clear or easy to understand and are asked to be educated alongside students and staff with often little to no knowledge or empathy of their experiences.
- Needless to say for many of our young people this is simply too big of an ask. Whilst they are doing their utmost to adapt, the system seems unable or unwilling to meet in the middle and provide an accessible experience.
- For a long time, AsIAM has been contacted by parents whose children are not able to attend school. In some instances, the correct provision be it an autism class or special school is unavailable or there are not enough resources to support the child in school. In other instances, the school is not operating an inclusive practise around autism - leading to anxiety, sensory overload and social isolation. And perhaps most disturbingly, children whose autistic

behaviours are treated as matters of discipline in the same school policy designed for dealing with students who “smoke behind the shed”.

- We discovered overtime that the issue of children out of school was not straight forward. Often a parent could not answer “yes” or “no” to the question “Does your child go to school?”. They may attend but irregularly with their levels of anxiety leading to long periods out of school, they may have insufficient support (be it resources or culture) leading to a school or at times a parent deciding to insist on a reduced hours timetable or they may simply not have a place to go to school at all.
- What struck us throughout the process was the utter indifference by the Department of Education and Skills to this issue. The Department cannot tell you how many autistic students are out of school or indeed how many are on reduced timetables. They don’t know because they have not asked and instead have left schools to their own devices in terms of both enrolment and managing school days, paid for by the taxpayer.
- As a result, we wanted to demonstrate that this was a genuine and real problem. We conducted a survey of the autism community in relation to absence from school and published our report “Invisible Children” during World Autism Month in April. The aim of this report was not to establish a definitive solution to the problem – this is a much bigger piece of work with no single answer- but rather to make a case for the Department to engage with us and take action.
- A significant cohort of our respondents, 17%, were students who were on reduced timetables. Some of these students were as young as 4 or 5. In some instances, parents who did not wish to have a reduced timetable were threatened with a suspension or expulsion process for not complying. In many instances, reduced timetables were a symptom of a lack of resources and knowledge. Today I would like to make specific recommendations which AsIAM feel could help this cohort of students:
 - 1) We are calling on the Department of Education to recognise that reduced timetables, whilst unacceptable, are happening. We do not feel a school ever has a right to place a student on a reduced timetable without a parent’s consent. Equally we strongly believe that schools should be given additional resources for the students who need it most. We do understand that for some autistic students a reduced timetable works well and is the will of the parent. As a result we believe there should be national guidelines on the practise and that the keyholder to sanctioning a reduced hours day should be either the SENO and/or NEPs not a school itself. This brings important oversight and is along the lines of action recently taken in New Brunswick, Canada.
 - 2) We believe reduced timetables should be a standing item on every agenda of every Board of Management– with each instance recorded and the data aggregated nationally so that we can better understand the practise
 - 3) The Department needs to do more to support schools who are proactively working to be inclusive. We welcome the in-school therapy pilot and aspects of the new School Inclusion Model in bringing additional expertise to bear in

schools. We also believe there is a need to recognise that many students who need support are neither a danger to themselves or others or a flight risk – but not providing support such as SNA provision may well lead to time outside of school

- 4) When a child is on a reduced timetable is it necessary for other state actors such as the HSE and Tusla to provide additional support to help a child whilst out of school. Very few of our families have had any interaction with Tusla and we feel this is an alarming trend
- 5) This issue is not just about resources it is about the need for accessible schools for the autism community. We believe mandatory teacher training, both in initial teacher training and CPD, must be a priority for improving student experience. I would commend the work done by Mary Immaculate College, Thurles in being the first HEI in making autism a mandatory element on its second level teacher training programme – this is something which has been recommended by the NCSE and I would encourage the Committee to hear testimony from the college at some point. In addition, school policies, physical environments and curriculum needs to be autism proofed and tested. AsIAM has been delighted to develop a framework for schools in this regard, in partnership with our colleagues in the Joint Managerial Body, this was recently launched at the JMB Conference and we look forward to piloting it in September.
- 6) Our vision is that every child should be able to attend mainstream school with their peers – this is something enshrined in the UNCRRPD – however until our schools truly become universally inclusive there are students who need the support of special classes and schools. Increased provision of both is needed if we wish to ensure that every child accesses a quality education in order to reach their personal potential.

I thank the Committee for its time and look forward to your questions