

Joint Committee on Education and Skills

Reduced Timetables in Schools

Opening Statement: Minister McHugh

Minister for Education and Skills

24 September 2019

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Chairperson,

I would like to thank the Committee for the invitation and for affording me the opportunity to speak here today on the issue of Reduced Timetables.

I would also like to thank the representative bodies who presented on this issue at the previous hearing, for their input and their contributions.

The basic aim of this Government is to use our economic success to build a fair and compassionate society. Equality of opportunity is at the heart of our vision.

As I have stated on many previous occasions and I want to reiterate it here today - each and every child has a right to education, to enable them to live a full life and to realise his or her potential.

I have already made clear my position is that all pupils who are enrolled in a school should attend school for the full day, unless exempted from doing so for exceptional circumstances.

Reduced timetables are not in anyway a standard aspect of a child's experience of school and must not be allowed to become such; they are exceptional measures. While in some circumstances it may be necessary to use a reduced timetable, for example, as a means of assisting the reintegration of a pupil to a school routine, such arrangements should only be put in place in limited and time bound circumstances.

Officials in my Department have been working closely with officials from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and TUSLA (which is under the remit of DCYA) concerning monitoring and reporting of this practice to address the issues raised in the interim report from the Committee.

A set of Guidelines is being prepared jointly by my own Department working with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and TUSLA.

The purpose of these Guidelines is to provide clarity to school authorities and parents or guardians around the reporting of reduced timetables in schools, to ensure that the use of reduced timetables is limited to only those circumstances where it is absolutely necessary and, that where in the rare circumstances such usage occurs, schools follow best practice with the interests of the student to the fore.

As is normal practice, prior to finalising the guidelines, my Department, Minister Zappone's Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and TUSLA are arranging for a consultation process with education stakeholders, including school management bodies.

Provision of supports is critical and I want to highlight the investment that this Government is making.

This year's education budget is €10.8 billion. This highlights the Government's strong belief in, and commitment to, the power of education.

Nearly one euro in every five of this year's budget, about €1.9 billion, is invested in supporting children with special educational needs, including those with challenging behaviour, in schools.

This is the highest ever level of Government expenditure on special education.

This provides for a continuum of special educational provision to be made available for children with special educational needs, including those with challenging behaviours, so that regardless of the level of need of the child, educational provision can be made for them.

The number of Special education teachers has increased by 37% from 9,740 in 2011, to over 13,400. The number of Special Needs Assistants has risen by 51%, from 10,575 in 2011 to 15,950 at present.

Schools can now allocate additional teaching support to a child whose challenging behaviour is having a significant impact on their ability to learn in school. Children do not need a special education needs diagnosis to access these supports and parents or guardians will no longer be required to get their child such a diagnosis.

Schools may also access SNA support for children with additional care needs, including challenging behaviour.

All schools can access in school support and CPD from the NCSE to assist their teachers in working with children who display challenging behaviour.

The number of specialist placements for children with complex special educational needs has also been significantly increased by this Government.

Over 1050 additional special placements have been provided for the new school year.

There are now 1,621 special classes, compared to 548 in 2011, including 1,355 special classes cater for children with Autism.

125 special schools, including a new special school established this year, also provide specialist education for students with complex special educational needs. These schools now provide over 8,000 places compared to 6,848 in 2011.

I note the committee questioned whether SNA support is the most appropriate support to a child's challenging behaviour.

As you know the view of my Department and the NCSE is that students need the right support from the right person at the right time to achieve their full potential.

To this end a pre-school and in-school therapy demonstration project is being undertaken in 75 pre-schools and 75 schools to provide in-school therapeutic support for students. In addition, €4.75m was allocated in Budget 2019 for the trialling of a new School Inclusion Model of support to include in-school provision of behavioural practitioners, psychologists and regional support teams to build capacity in schools to meet the needs of their students.

The outcome of this pilot will inform the future policy and service provision, including the provision of behaviour support.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) work with both primary and post-primary schools and are concerned with learning, behaviour, social and emotional development.

This Government has recognised the valuable input of the National Educational Psychological Service for pupils and schools and over the lifetime of this Government has increased psychologist numbers from a sanctioned level of 173 whole time equivalent in 2015 to a current 204 wholetime posts with a commensurate increase in investment from €18m to €20.75m per annum in the period. There are currently 190 posts in the system with recruitment of some 14 new posts and vacancies currently underway.

Supports are also provided to DEIS schools at an overall cost of €125m to 891 schools serving approximately 190,000 pupils to improve attendance, retention and school participation.

Enhanced capitation for Traveller children in the system is provided at a cost of €1.1million

Actions are also being progressed under the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy to improve educational outcomes for Travellers, including a pilot project to target school attendance, retention and participation commencing this September. Additional supports have been provided to support this pilot project in the form of Home School Community Liaison Officers funded by my Department, in addition to Traveller Education Workers funded by the Department of Justice and Equality and Educational Welfare Officers employed by TUSLA.

In summary in relation to reduced timetables, I anticipate that the guidelines and the notification system will allow us to monitor the use of reduced timetables and ultimately address the issues raised.

If parents have concerns about the use by a school of a reduced timetable for their child they can contact their local Educational Welfare Officer, who has statutory responsibility for ensuring that the rights of the child to an education are upheld and will advise them on the most appropriate type of action.

My Department will continue to work closely with TUSLA Educational Welfare Service and with the NCSE to ensure that, where in the very limited number of cases a reduced timetable is deemed necessary, such measures will be used for only time-limited periods.

I thank the Committee again for highlighting this issue and the groups and individuals that have contributed. As a Government we have demonstrated and will continue to work to realise our commitment to ensuring that all of our children receive the fullest education possible.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.