

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters

Attendance by Department of Education officials on Wednesday

18th Oct at 5.30pm

Opening Statement

Cathaoirleach,

At the outset I wish to thank you and the Committee for the invitation to be here today representing the Department of Education.

My name is Martina Mannion and I am an Assistant Secretary General in the Department with responsibility for Special Education and Inclusion.

I am accompanied today by three of my colleagues who work as Principal Officers in the Special Education Section of the Department across a range of policy and operational issues - Mr. Brendan Doody, Mr. Frank Hanlon and Mr. Martin McLoughlin.

I am also joined by colleagues from two other areas within the Department, namely Ms. Jill Fannin who is a Principal Officer in the Teacher Education Section and Ms. Gráinne Cullen, who is a Principal Officer in the Social Inclusion Unit in the Department.

Policy on special education and current provision

The Department of Education's policy in respect of supporting children and young people with special educational needs is very clear. Based on a child-centred approach to the provision of education, our role is to ensure that all children with special educational needs are supported to access an education appropriate to their needs.

This means that children with special educational needs should be supported to the greatest degree possible in mainstream settings with additional teaching and care supports, where appropriate, to allow them to achieve their potential. In circumstances where children with special educational needs require more specialised interventions, we ensure access to special school or special class places. As a Department we recognise that these more specialist supports and settings have an important role to play and in line with the needs of the child and parental wishes, we have opened hundreds of additional special classes both at primary and post primary level in recent years as well as seven new special schools.

It is worth noting that while much of the public focus has been on the additional special school and special class places, the vast majority of children with special educational needs are educated in mainstream settings in the Irish education system. Approximately 97% of all children attend mainstream settings.

In the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of children and young people diagnosed with special educational needs; particularly in the area of autism. What is happening in Ireland is not unique and there is recognition internationally of growth in the area of special educational need. As a Department we are very aware of this need and are proactive in working with all stakeholders, including parents and advocacy groups to ensure that we are meeting that need in a compassionate and inclusive way in schools across the country.

In order to continue to meet this need, last week in Budget 2024, further investment in special education was announced with an increase in

funding of a further 5% bringing the total education funding in the area of special education to €2.7 billion.

A significant part of the additional €106 million funding will provide for an additional 744 special education teachers and 1,216 SNAs to be recruited in 2024. Funding is also provided for another 2,700 special education places in special classes and special schools.

Budget 2024 also provides for continued funding for an enhanced summer programme to meet the needs of those with special educational needs and who are experiencing educational disadvantage. Funding is also being provided for additional supports for special schools in recognition of the particular challenges that impact on these schools.

Implementing inclusive education in schools

Turning to the agenda for today's meeting and the agenda items that the Committee wish to discuss, I want to confirm that the Department and NCSE remain committed to further delivering on a range of supports and initiatives to ensure our education system is as inclusive as possible for all children and young people. The Committee will be aware that the NCSE policy advice on special classes and special schools was received by the Department earlier this year and is currently being reviewed by both Ministers at present.

In parallel to this policy advice, the Department and the NCSE continue to introduce a number of new initiatives and programmes to progressively develop a more inclusive education system for students with special educational needs.

Transitions programme and School Inclusion Model (SIM)

When we were last before this Committee, members were very interested in the new pilot programmes to support the transition of young people with special educational needs after school. The pilots ensure that participants can avail of a continuum of learning and skill development, enabling them to explore the full range of options available to them and achieve greater independence and participation in society post-school.

I am happy to say that both pilot programmes are progressing well with more than 300 students involved. Both programmes will be subject to review and the outcomes of this work will be used to inform future policy in this area.

In relation to the School Inclusion Model (SIM), both the NCSE and the Department recognise the benefits of teachers and other professionals working collaboratively. In that regard, we are currently working with NCSE on a proposal to expand the in-school therapy element of the SIM programme. As an initial step, the proposal involves using the current allocation of therapist posts to support schools across the rest of the NCSE regional team structures around the entire country. Officials in the Department are engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform in that regard.

Embedding these therapy posts across the NCSE regional team structures will allow for the wide array of support staff in the NCSE, such as Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), team leaders,

advisors and behaviour practitioners to work cohesively to provide a whole of child response for students and schools.

Training

The Committee has rightly highlighted the importance of training for school staff. It is only by ensuring that we have a well-supported and trained teaching and SNA workforce can we truly embed inclusive practices in our schools. We also recognise the critical importance of developing and supporting inclusive leadership practices in our schools. A lot of schools have adopted very inclusive teaching and learning approaches and it is important that we build on this work through our initial teacher education programmes and continuing professional development supports for school leaders, teachers and SNAs.

The Initial Teacher Education Policy Statement, published by Minister Foley earlier this year sets out a number of important actions in the area of inclusion, including the aim to have student teachers undertake a mandatory school placement in a special education setting.

The Department continues to provide a significant level of funding for teachers to undertake post-graduate qualifications which focus on supporting students with autism and special educational needs.

In addition, the NCSE are undergoing a significant organisational change programme at present and as part of this, as provided for in Budget 2023, they will be recruiting a significant number of additional advisors and support staff to ensure that schools are better supported in relation to training and guidance.

Home tuition and increase in special classes

I have already outlined the ongoing work by the NCSE and Department in relation to the provision of additional special classes and special school places.

The Department considers that the current work being done to provide additional specialist capacity, including special education teachers and SNAs into our schools can, over the medium to longer term, ensure a more inclusive education system. The experience and skills developed by staff working in our special schools and classes at present are and will continue to be an invaluable resource for schools as we move towards a more inclusive education system for all.

With almost 3,000 special classes in our mainstream schools at present, the NCSE now advise that there is capacity within the special class system to meet the needs of children who may require such placements. As such, this will assist by ensuring that the number of school aged children with special educational needs who may need to access Home Tuition support on a temporary basis is kept to a minimum.

While the Department understands that there may be challenges for some parents in relation to the home tuition scheme, it is important to note that this support is a short-term temporary measure and that the NCSE at local level will continue to support families to secure an appropriate placement for a child.

Earlier this month, Minister Madigan announced a new national recruitment campaign by the NCSE to hire additional Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs). These additional front line staff will ensure that further support is available to families of children with special educational needs.

Reduced school day reports

As the Committee members will recall, in September 2021, for the first time, the Department published guidelines for schools on the use of reduced school days. The guidelines clearly set out that any use of reduced school days must be limited and should only be considered by a school where it is deemed absolutely necessary and they can only be implemented with the consent of a student's parent or guardian. Schools are required to inform the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) when a student is placed on a reduced school day. These Guidelines came in to effect in schools from January of 2022.

Prior to the publication by the Department last month, there had been no publicly available data on the use of reduced school days by schools. The published reports now provide a baseline of data and information, which assists the Department and key agencies working together to address the findings from the reports and ultimately helps schools and families to support children in their educational journey.

Conclusion

We have worked hard to ensure we have supporting the provision of an inclusive education system for all children, particularly children with special educational needs. But it is important that we continue to strive to do more. In relation to future of special education provision in this country, along with the NCSE policy advice, I think it is also important to reference the ongoing review of the EPSEN Act which also will be key in shaping the future of special education. We have had over 28,000 people so far contributing to this review and we will be continuing with in person focus groups, including with children, over the coming weeks.

I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to provide a number of updates in relation to ongoing work by the Department in the area of inclusive education. My colleagues and I look forward to engaging with Committee members during today's meeting and addressing any questions that you might have.

Thank you Chair.