

# **Joint Oireachtas Committee on Disability Matters**

## **Attendance by National Council for Special Education**

**28<sup>th</sup> February 6.15pm**

### **Opening Statement**

**Cathaoirleach,**

**At the outset I wish to thank you and the Committee for the kind invitation to be here today representing the National Council for Special Education.**

**My name is John Kearney and I am privileged to be Chief Executive Officer of the NCSE. I am accompanied today by two of my colleagues who work as Principal Officers in the NCSE - Ms. Helen Walsh Head of Inclusion and Education Support Services, Jennifer Doran Head of Finance, Governance and Research.**

**The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has a vision of a world class inclusive education system for Ireland, where children, young people and adults with special educational needs are supported to achieve better outcomes in their education and are enabled to reach their potential. Since 2011, we have provided six policy advice publications to the Minister for Education across a range of areas relevant to the provision of special education.**

**The most recent policy advice on an Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society was requested in 2018 by the then Minister for Education Joe McHugh to the NCSE. The advice was requested in the context of Ireland's ratification in 2018 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and on foot of significant growth in the**

number of special classes being opened in schools. We were very pleased to formally present early this year to Minister for Education Norma Foley TD and the Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion Josepha Madigan TD the NCSE's policy advice paper '*An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society.*'

The policy advice was prepared following an extensive period of research, consultation and deliberation undertaken by the NCSE. The NCSE took great care to establish a strong evidence basis to inform this policy advice paper. The NCSE arranged extensive consultations and school visits, carried out a multi-strand programme of research, undertook international study visits and examined evidence of how education provision for students with special educational needs is supported in other jurisdictions.

There are already exceptional inclusive practices occurring in our schools that provide supportive and nurturing learning environments for students. Schools are using innovative approaches to teaching and learning, tailoring interventions to meet students' needs, and accessing specialist support to ensure that all students have access to the curriculum and achieve their full potential. We acknowledge and celebrate these best practices and seek to embed these practices across the education system.

This policy advice reflects significant and positive changes that have occurred in the provision of supports for students with special education needs. It presents a comprehensive examination of the current state of special education in our schools, and provides a range of recommendations for improving the provision of special education for students. In developing its advice, the NCSE was keen to determine if the very significant investment in special classes and special schools is spent in a way which best supports positive outcomes for students with special educational needs.

**The policy paper recommends the phased development of the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system for Ireland. It is envisaged that this system will be informed by, and aligned to, the relevant articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) which Ireland ratified in 2018. The advice recommends a phased transition with incremental changes taking place over many years with special schools and classes remaining an important placement option for students and parents. The advice recommends that the Department of Education and the NCSE should seek the evolution of an education system that is configured specifically for the Irish context. Specific recommendations include for this emerging education system:**

#### **Progressive Realisation of an Inclusive Education System**

- **The progressive realisation of the Irish inclusive education system where all local schools are enabled to educate all students in their community in line with students' strengths and abilities.**
- **The establishment of a strategic planning group under the leadership of the Department of Education and the NCSE to further develop the Irish education system through the progressive realisation of the vision of an inclusive school system.**

#### **Therapeutic, Psychological and Behavioural Supports**

- **The School Inclusion Model (SIM) should be expanded nationally to ensure that all schools in the country have access to therapeutic supports. Avenues should be explored to promote the development of a co-professional model that supports professionals using a values based approach.**
- **The strategic planning group should also work with the Department of Education and the Department of Further and**

**Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to ensure a sufficient number of training places for therapists and psychologists arising from the expansion of the school support services in these areas.**

### **Professional Development and Teacher Education**

- **The strategic planning group should request the Teaching Council to determine and explicitly set out standards for the knowledge, skills, and competencies for all teachers to teach all students, including students with special educational needs.**
- **The strategic planning group should work with Teacher Education Section, the NCSE and other organisations and services that provide professional learning programmes for teachers.**

### **Student Placement and Provision Recommendations**

- **The strategic planning group should work to develop a structured standard framework to support a shared decision making process on student placement and review.**
- **The strategic planning group should engage with the Department of Education, the NCSE and schools on the development of a national system to support schools to determine, measure and report on student progress and outcomes.**

### **Curriculum and Assessment**

- **The strategic planning group should work with the Department of Education, the NCSE, the NCCA and other relevant stakeholders to bring about the development of an inclusive assessment framework to support the identification of the learning needs of students who require highly specialised supports and provision.**

**It is important to note that the recommendations outlined in the policy advice will be realised progressively over time, taking into account the specific needs of students in each school in their local context. The implementation of these recommendations will require careful planning, collaboration, and investment. These recommendations are made with a view to the phased development of the progressive realisation of an inclusive education system for Ireland and for that system to be informed by, and aligned to, the relevant articles of the UNCRPD.**

**The Irish education system has benefitted from significant investment in special education with a package of €2.7 billion for 2024, which is 26 per cent of the Department's budget. There are almost 3,000 special classes providing for over 18, 000 children. 1,800 special classes have been added in the past three years, and the NCSE will lead developments in opening another 600 in the next two years. The NCSE will also be assisting the opening of 4 special schools next September, which will see the 134 special schools in this country continuing to play a vital role in meeting the needs of over 9000 children.**

**The benefits of improving the provision of education are clear, and with continued commitment, we can create a more inclusive and equitable education system for all students.**

**I thank the committee for giving me the opportunity to provide an update in relation to the NCSE's Policy advice for an Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society.**

**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.**