



Down
Syndrome
Ireland

National Leadership Local Support

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Inclusion

An inclusive society begins with inclusive education, but inclusion is more than physical presence. According to the UNCRPD, inclusion is a process of systematic reform embodying changes and modification in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers and provide all students of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience.

For children with Down syndrome, research has consistently found that academic progress and achievements are better for those children attending mainstream school (Fox et al, 2004; Buckley et al, 2008; de Graaf et al, 2012). The majority of children with Down syndrome now enroll in their local primary school, and increasing numbers are progressing to mainstream Post-Primary school.

This is a welcome development, and is in line with Irish education policy. The 2004 EPSEN Act states that children with special educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive, mainstream environment with their peers.

Shockingly, 17 years later, the EPSEN Act has yet to be fully implemented. The Irish state has an unfortunate history of introducing legislation which is then not fully implemented, and often the sections which are left unimplemented are those which would have the greatest impact. The failure to enact the provisions in the EPSEN Act relating to an individual right to assessment and individual education plan (IEP) denies students the statutory right to the educational supports needed to enable them to benefit from an inclusive education.

While in many cases, teachers are willing to devise IEPs, this is not universal. Schools are 'encouraged' rather than obligated to provide an IEP. Assessments may or may not be available. We have long campaigned for the EPSEN Act to be fully implemented and adequately resourced so that the rights of students with additional needs are enshrined in law, rather than depending on 'encouragement' from the DES and the goodwill of schools and teachers.

We are aware that education theory and practice have moved on since 2004, and understand the calls for a full review of the EPSEN Act before it is fully implemented, however we are looking for action now, not in another decade or two. We acknowledge that there may be a need for amendments, but we believe that the rights based approach within the EPSEN Act needs to be rapidly adopted and the resources provided to do this properly. We are not looking for a repeat of the early years Assessment of Need process, where statutory obligations are often not met, and identification of need brings no obligation to provide support. We are looking for students to have statutory access to individualised plans and supports which have been identified as necessary for their education.

We are also calling for additional SNA and resource teaching support to be provided to students, particularly this year. We all know that students with additional needs have been badly impacted by school closures during the pandemic. These same students will need additional support to continue their learning: additional resource

teaching, team teaching and care supports. The practice of sharing access to SNAs across different classes is difficult to manage at the best of times, and is completely inappropriate in a pandemic. This needs to stop.

We would also like to ask whether the DES is gathering information and monitoring the use of reduced timetables in schools. All children have been affected by reduced access to education during the pandemic, but the fact remains that children with disabilities were disproportionately affected by reduced school days or weeks long before Covid 19. We have raised this with the committee before, and were assured in early 2019 that there would be monitoring of the use of reduced timetables in schools and consultation about the issue.

To summarise, we are calling on the Government to:

- Amend and implement the EPSEN Act without delay
- Provide adequate resources and training for teachers so they can provide critical individual education planning (IEPs) for children with Down syndrome.
- Provide additional resources so that any needs which are identified in the planning process can be met.
- Confirm access to the extended school year programme to all students who have Down syndrome. Families need to be reassured that access to this programme is ongoing.
- End the practice of shared SNAs for children in different classrooms.
- Consider applications for additional support favourably this year, particularly where children are struggling to reintegrate into school or are moving into a new situation.
- Monitor use of reduced timetables in schools over and above the pandemic related closures and make this information public.
- Work with organisations and schools to develop parameters to ensure that reduced timetables are used for the shortest possible time and only for very explicit reasons.