

Opening Statement for presentation to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science re invitation to committee meeting for discussion on the Education Needs of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students 4th July 2023

Eimear O'Rourke , Principal. Holy Family School for the Deaf.

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you for this discussion on the Education Needs of Deaf and Hearing Students.

My school, Holy Family School for the Deaf, a special school sits within the continuum of national provision of Deaf/ Hard of Hearing children in Ireland. Holy Family is an amalgamation of the two former schools for the Deaf in Cabra and is the inheritor of Deaf/HH education provision that stretches back to 1840s. With an enrolment of 135 for the new school year 2023/24, most Deaf/HH children now attend mainstream schools.

The most effective way to educate of Deaf/ HH children is very debated. In the Irish context Deaf/HH education has undergone huge change particularly in the last 30 years. Enabling Deaf/HH children to reach their full potential is challenging because educational needs vary greatly- there is no one effective way to teach all Deaf /HH children. Outcomes are lower because key barriers continue to prevent Deaf/HH children from achieving their academic, linguistic, and social emotional potential.

In Holy Family we have a very diverse cohort of pupils who communicate both orally and/or whose first or preferred language is Irish Sign Language ISL. We provide the full national curriculum from early intervention, through the primary and post primary. Our pupils sit the state examinations for junior cycle, Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate. Since amalgamation in 2016, the number of pupils with additional needs or Deaf plus enrolling has increased. Therefore, we have introduced Junior Cycle Level 2 programmes and are actively engaging with the NCCA in relation to provision for this cohort of pupils at senior cycle.

Educating Deaf/HH students requires more than just differentiating the curriculum, it requires an understanding of the impact of deafness on language development, literacy, and social and emotional development. For many of our students English is not their first language.

It also requires that we can effectively meet the unique communication needs of each individual student often within the same class group. Our teachers are competent in ISL and are supported by the SNA team. At Holy Family school for the Deaf our staff have a wealth of shared experience to meet needs of our student population.

Deaf people are at higher risk of mental health illness due to the impacts of social isolation and language deprivation. True to our school motto *Every family has a story, welcome to ours* we endeavour to provide a safe space where Deaf/HH children don't feel different or have to 'fit in'. They are inspired by positive Deaf role models on staff. In Holy Family Deaf identity and Deaf culture is cherished.

Holy Family is a very much a specialist rather than a special school.

Our pupils are the most positive learners that you are likely to meet in any educational setting. Expectations for our pupils are high and we know that with the right support they can absolutely achieve their full potential as is evident from the success of Shane Hamilton (with me today) and his Transition Year class group in the National Finals of the Young Social Innovator competition.

Our specialist school for the Deaf/HH strives towards excellence, but we are aware of the constant need to improve outcomes for our pupils. To support our work in the school and for improved outcomes for all Deaf/HH children, we ask the Minister for Education to:

1. **Invest in Deaf Education research and teacher education** The only options for CPD resulting in post graduate qualification are Birmingham or Manchester universities.
2. **Ensure the Deaf children and Deaf educators have full access to information.**
 - (i) **This means funding interpreters** We currently pay an average of €13000 annually from school capitation.
3. **Develop an ISL curriculum for primary and post primary Deaf and Hard of Hearing pupils.**
4. **Invest in ISL learning programmes for staff.** Release staff to further to develop ISL skills or alternatively provide for an ISL teacher on staff.
5. **Invest in and fully resource a specialist national multi-disciplinary team MDT for Deaf.**
6. **Family Involvement and support** Holy Family is the biggest Deaf school in the country our students travel from all over Ireland. A Home School liaison teacher would be of enormous benefit.
7. **Resource our school** We are currently bi located on two different campuses – 3 kms apart. Our new school building project is with the NTMA. Please prioritise this project so that all our pupils can be on one campus and annual grants can be invested in education provision rather than supporting four school buildings.

Shane and are delighted to meet with you today. the Holy Family Community and I personally are very proud of our school, and I invite members of this committee to visit us in the new school term.

