



## Opening Statement

### Down Syndrome Ireland

#### Statement to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

#### Changes to Special Education Teacher (SET) Allocations -

March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024

On behalf of Down Syndrome Ireland, I would like to thank the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science for inviting us to speak here today. My name is Fidelma Brady, Head of Education Down Syndrome Ireland and I am joined by Turlough Kelly, Communication & Advocacy Manager Down Syndrome Ireland.

Down Syndrome Ireland, the national charity which supports thousands of Irish people with Down syndrome, is gravely concerned by the content of circulars *0002/2024* and *0003/2024* issued by the Department of Education relating to the calculation of the SET allocation for each school from the 2024/25 school year until further notice. In the circular, it is proposed that the category of “complex educational needs” be removed as a criterion for allocating Special Education Teacher hours.

Based on our analysis of the proposal, feedback from our members and survey results, we can tell you that the proposed change will have a potentially devastating effect on many pupils with Down syndrome and their educational attainment. We are basing this conclusion on our understanding and long experience of supporting students with Down syndrome at all levels of the education system.

A child or young person who has additional support needs arising from one or more complex factors or multiple factors (needs that are likely to continue for more than a year) is deemed to have ‘complex needs.’ To say a pupil has “complex needs” is not just a matter of

terminology; it is a very real and important description of that pupil's educational need, and of the supports they require.

And those needs are, indeed, complex and multi-faceted. When we look at children with Down syndrome, we must consider both the intellectual disability and the chromosomal disorder or disability.

The chromosomal disorder in itself has multiple factors:

- Chromosomal disorder affects all parts of the body, so a greater awareness of physical health needed
- Specific motor and sensory issues are common
- Significant additional impact on speech and language

The intellectual disability and chromosomal disorder both contribute to:

- Delayed motor skills, fine and gross – leading to clumsiness and manipulation difficulties
- Health issues
- Auditory and visual differences
- Speech and language disorder, over and above what would be expected
- Short term auditory memory / verbal working memory problems
- Consolidation and retention problems
- Difficulties with generalisations, thinking and reasoning.
- Concentration and attention can be a challenge

The combination of all of these factors must be considered complex needs for children with Down syndrome. And the very complexity of those needs must be the basis for the educational environment we provide for them. There is no possible “one size fits all” approach that respects and addresses those needs. Quite simply, many pupils with Down syndrome will not thrive educationally if their complex needs are not specifically addressed.

Research has found that academic progress and achievements were better for those children with Down syndrome in mainstream school, with adequate educational supports in place, as opposed to those children educated in special school settings. The majority of children with Down syndrome now enrol in their local primary school, with increasing numbers progressing

to mainstream post-primary school. A recent internal survey conducted by Down Syndrome Ireland (January 2024 - prior to Circulars 0002/2024 and 0003/2024) indicated that 62% of those who responded were enrolled in mainstream schools. Many parents have since expressed their concern and their intention to move their children to a special education setting due to the removal of the category of complex educational needs for the SET allocation for 2024-2025. An earlier survey (2023) found that 35% of families who had already moved their child to a special school did so because the supports provided in mainstream were not adequate. If the supports provided then were deemed to be inadequate, how can any proposed lessening of supports improve the situation? Schools, in many instances, will have less capacity to meet the needs of this most vulnerable cohort of children. Indeed, the Department directive indicating that the most support should still be directed to those children with the greatest level of need has implications for all children. We must remember that the learning experiences of all children will be impacted, not just those with special needs. Things are going to get worse if resources are spread more thinly, as will be the case from 2024-2025 onwards, if the proposed model for SET Allocation is allowed to continue.

I would also like to take this opportunity today to express our concern and disappointment with the complete lack of consultation between the Department of Education and the disability groups such as ourselves. While we of course respect the necessity for unions and boards of management to be a big part of the consultation process, organisations such as those represented here have a wealth of knowledge and of members' experience to draw on. Had we been involved at an earlier date, the concerns we are raising today would have been raised at a much earlier phase of the process; parents would have had more opportunity to reflect, respond and prepare, and would not now be in the position of urgently contacting public representatives to safeguard their children's educational future.

All in all, we consider this action of the Department of Education to be a very detrimental action for our members with Down syndrome. Every year another 130-150 babies join the population of people with Down syndrome living in Ireland. In the 1980's, average life expectancy for someone with Down syndrome was around 25 years. It's now around 60. The Department of Education, by failing to provide adequate teaching supports in childhood, are kicking the can down the road. They are not just impacting on the lives of children with Down syndrome right now, they are storing up social and economic costs for the future.

***Students with Down syndrome have the right to be educated in their local mainstream school. It is not unreasonable to expect that any additional training and resources required should be provided.***

*Dr Fidelma Brady & Turlough Kelly*

*Down Syndrome Ireland*