

Special Committee on Covid-19 Response

Opening Statement

Teresa Griffin, Chief Executive Officer, National Council for Special Education

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Chairperson and Committee members

Thank you for inviting me here today. My name is Teresa Griffin and I am the CEO of the National Council for Special Education. With me today are Mary McGrath, Head of Operations and Madeline Hickey, Acting Head of Special Education. Mary has overall responsibility for our regional teams and all operational matters within NCSE. Madeline currently has responsibility for special educational policy and the development of teacher professional learning within NCSE.

Impact of Covid-19 on NCSE

Moving online and working from home was challenging for everyone. As an organisation, NCSE was able to move online relatively quickly as many of our

staff already worked from home and most of us had the technology to do so. We are delivering nearly all of our services to families and schools online. However, it still required a period of adjustment and changed processes.

Impact of Covid-19 on students with special educational needs and schools

It is very clear that Covid-19 and the resultant closure of school buildings has challenged the education system to its utmost. It has had a significant impact on all students, their families and teachers. However, it has had a profound impact on many students with special educational needs and their families who greatly value the structure, individualised teaching, adapted curricula and intensive support given to these students in schools.

Many students with special educational needs are not independent learners. They are not a homogenous group of students who can take a piece of text or an article or a chapter of a math's book and work independently. Some need adult assistance with every activity and cannot be left alone for any period of time. Some cannot engage with learning in an online environment. All of them need more support and guidance, over and above that required by other students, to give them the best chance to reach their potential. They need an education that is differentiated to their abilities and needs.

To move a school-based education online overnight, without the planning, time, equipment and training required for all involved was very challenging for teachers, principals, students and their families. On-line education needs access to technology but for these students, it may also need access to specialist assistive technology, adapted curricular activities, therapeutic inputs and supports for families.

From an NCSE point of view, we immediately began to develop resources that we felt could best assist parents and teachers in trying to support students at home. The resources have been broadly welcomed, and in particular our seven booklets on promoting learning and positive behaviour at home; and our theme of the week material, but we recognise that many parents do not have access to technology, stable broadband, or time nor are they teachers themselves.

We know that students with complex needs regress more than typical students and also take longer to recoup their learning. We were very pleased that the Minister was able to run summer provision this year and expand eligibility to include students with additional needs other than severe/profound general learning disability or autism. This is in line with our 2015 policy advice on the

extended school year. Summer provision will enable students to re-engage with learning and assist the transition back to school.

Position regarding the 2020/21 school year and the impact on NCSE

Like everybody else, the NCSE would like to see a full return of all students to school in late August/September. We are not public health experts and therefore cannot advise the DES in that respect. We do note – in the return to school context – that many special classes and special schools have much lower pupil teacher ratios – often as few as six students in a class with a teacher and 2 SNAs and therefore social distancing issues may not be as challenging as in mainstream. We are working with DES colleagues to prepare resources and supports that we think will be useful for both students and teachers in transitioning back into school.

We are also working to ensure that our work resourcing schools as well as our teacher professional learning, in-school support, visiting teacher services can be delivered on-line or in a blended manner or in person.

We are very happy to clarify any matters in our submission for the committee.