

1. Introduction

1.1 The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is committed to promoting a society where children and adults with special educational needs receive an education that enables them to achieve their potential. The NCSE welcomes the decision of the COVID-19 Committee to consider the reopening of schools due to the impact of school closures on children with special educational needs.

1.2 The NCSE has a number of roles including:

- Supporting schools to enable students with special educational needs achieve better outcomes and ensure a range of educational placement options are available. We do this through providing advice and supports to schools, as well as providing advice and professional learning for teachers e.g. 16,511 teachers were engaged in professional development and learning at NCSE seminars and Whole Staff seminars during 2019. In addition, our Visiting Teachers provided additional support to almost 1,300 blind or visually impaired children and 5,584 Deaf or hard of hearing children – in their homes or schools last year.
- Providing a research programme that identifies key issues, emerging trends and an evidence base to support the work of the NCSE and achievement of better outcomes for students with special educational needs – some 27 independent research reports are on our website covering a range of issues.
- Providing independent, expert and evidence-informed policy and practice advice to the Minister for Education and Skills.

1.3 The NCSE does not have any role in advising the DES in respect of matters to do with public health considerations as they may arise in schools.

2. The importance of education for students with additional needs

2.1 Access to education is of great importance for all children's development. The developmental and academic needs of any child may be considered as comprising those needs that are:

- a) Common to all children

- b) Common to children who share a disability or condition
- c) Unique to each child.

- 2.2 Over 7,900 students attend special schools and over 8,400 students attend special classes. Over 167,000 students with learning needs are supported in mainstream schools by 13,400 special education teachers. Approximately 36,500 students with additional care needs are supported by SNAs in mainstream schools, special classes and special schools.
- 2.3 Students with special educational needs present with a wide variety of needs. Some students have complex medical needs, others have physical or sensory disabilities, others have emotional and/or behavioural needs, others have a specific learning disability, and many have general learning disabilities. Many require intimate care; need assistance with eating, drinking, mobility, and so on. Often medication is required. For many with challenging behaviour, very specific interventions may be required – often on a one-to-one basis.
- 2.4 Education – whether in mainstream classes, special classes or in a special school – with access to qualified teachers, individualised education and support plans, differentiated education, appropriate supports from SNAs and/or technology plays a vital role in enabling students with special educational needs to develop social skills, life skills, academic skills and independence.
- 2.5 The NCSE supports as full a re-opening of all schools as is safe, in order to ensure that these needs are met. Arrangements for the re-opening of schools will need to be flexible to ensure that the unique needs of each student with additional needs, along with those needs that are common to all students, are met. The NCSE understands that the DES will have guidelines for schools on how to manage their normal day-to-day activities safely.

3. Impact of extended breaks on learning

- 3.1 Research has indicated that students learn best when instruction is continuous. Long absences break the rhythm of instruction, leads to forgetting, and requires a significant amount of review of material when students return to school (Cooper et al. (1996)¹. The NCSE (2016)²

¹ Cooper, Harris Allen, Ashley Batts. Extending the School Day or School Year: A Systematic Review of Research (1985-2009) Review of Educational Research; 2010, Vol. 80 Issue 3

² National Council Special Education (NCSE) (2016), Policy Advice Paper 5: Autism Spectrum Disorder

also observed the potential for regression in students' learning. Research showed students with significant intellectual disabilities can experience regression in learning and also a slower rate of recoupment with long absences. These students may be unable to store concepts in their long-term memory in a way that can be easily recalled. The amount of instruction they need to recover or "recoup" their abilities may be longer than other students need, and they may need additional instruction to catch up.

- 3.2 The impact of lockdown and social distancing/public health advice on socialisation and social-emotional well-being is significant, particularly for students with special educational needs. These students benefit greatly from the structured and supportive environment that schools provide. The human interaction that is encouraging and affirming becomes remote when school is closed.
- 3.3 To the extent that the home environment impacts learning, students who experience greater declines in educational measures over a summer can be expected to show similar declines over a long pandemic-related closure. The effectiveness of measures to continue the educational process, such as home schooling or distance-learning, depends on the extent to which the child is able to study in a home environment. We know that many students with additional needs are not independent learners, parents generally are not qualified teachers and homes may not have access to the assistive technology or expertise required to support students with complex learning needs. It must be assumed that many students will have experienced significant regression during this time.
- 3.4 The NCSE strongly supports the DES decision to have a Summer Education Programme this year. We especially welcome the Minister's decision to expand eligibility to include students with disabilities other than a severe/profound general learning disability, or autism.
- 3.5 This provision will be an essential tool in assisting students' transition back into formal learning and enable them to start recouping lost skills and knowledge. Significant anxiety is a feature for many students with additional needs. Supporting their emotional needs will be essential to assist the process of adjustment and re-engagement with learning.

4. Impact on Family

- 4.1 A return to school is essential to enable students with special educational needs return to learning. It is also essential for families and carers. Many students with special educational needs are completely dependent on adult assistance – to eat, drink, take medication, and be mobile. Some have very severe challenging behaviour. Many need therapeutic and clinical interventions such as physiotherapy, occupational therapy and nursing support.
- 4.2 School was an essential part of the normal family rhythm. Schools educate children, but for families of children with very significant complex needs, school time also provides an essential space for families and carers to do the normal activities taken for granted by the rest of society.
- 4.3 These past few months have been hard for many families but for some families of children with complex needs, this time has been very difficult. The summer provision will provide students with an early opportunity to recoup some lost skills and re-engage with learning, but it will also help families.

5. Transition back to school

- 5.1 Going back to school after the usual school holidays can be difficult for some students and especially for some students with special educational needs. Others really look forward to the routine and structure of school. Schools and teachers are experienced in this period of re-engagement and “settling in”. This year, given the extensive break, students may need more time to re-adjust to school.
- 5.2 School management and all staff will need to engage in a transition process supporting students to re-engage with learning and social activities and help them adapt to any new routines and changes in the school environment. Schools management and staff are very familiar with the School Improvement Process which is embedded in the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) Process³. These tools can greatly assist in planning the return to school.

³ <http://schoolself-evaluation.ie/>

5.3 NCSE is aware of the need for teachers and SNAs to be supported in this process and we are working with colleagues in the DES to develop resources and supports to meet this need including:

- Development of themed resource booklets to support teachers providing provision:
 - Promoting Positive Behaviour - practical supports for teachers delivering school and home based provision
 - Developing a 'Rules and Routines in the Infant Classroom' resource for those starting school
 - An interactive resource for teachers relating to books that support students to transition from Preschool-Primary.
- Developing a suite of resources and supports for young people with complex needs under the title of 'Getting Back to What We Know', to support the 'Summer Scheme' initially, and for use in schools on return to school thereafter. These include, amongst others:
 - Supporting students understanding of new routines with resources designed to support students with complex needs
 - Student voice – linking home and school so as those in the summer scheme are aware of what has happened at home since school closure
 - Social stories for supporting transition
 - A range of visuals to support transition back to school including supports around school transport and handwashing.
- Therapy Supports:
 - Occupational Therapy resources to support functional life skills and occupational well-being
 - Speech and Language Therapy resources to support language, communication and social skills.
- A pre-recorded webinar on 'Strategies to maintain skills'
- A video resource on 'Starting Primary School'.

6. Vulnerable students

- 6.1 Return to school in the Covid-19 context may be extremely difficult for medically vulnerable students. For some students and young people, the risk is higher especially for those who have a general learning disability along with an underlying medical condition. If it is not possible for these students to attend school, they will need to be provided with the means to continue to receive an appropriate education, personalised and well linked to therapeutic interventions.
- 6.2 Many special schools are already expert in matters of public health as they have tremendous experience in educating medically fragile students. The NCSE is concerned that other schools will need guidance and support in this area as a greater number of students, many of whom do not have additional educational needs, are now vulnerable as a result of underlying medical conditions. Supporting the needs of these young people while maintaining social distancing in school will be challenging.

7. Social distancing

7.1 Social Distancing and students with special educational needs

- 7.1.1 Social distancing is not a usual feature of school life and some students, particularly those with learning disabilities, will need a lot of support to understand and engage in social distancing in school. Teachers may need to explicitly teach the steps of social distancing to these young people.
- 7.1.2 There are some students who rely on close physical contact and/or the physical or verbal support of others to navigate the school environment and for whom social distancing cannot therefore be practiced all the time (e.g. some students using wheelchairs, students with visual impairment, students who need assistance with eating or intimate care.). The NCSE understands that the DES is considering such arrangements as part of the guidelines for schools – such arrangements will need to form part of each student’s support plan.

7.2 Social Distancing and Special Education Teachers (SET)

- 7.2.1 Over 13,400 teachers are employed specifically to provide additional and targeted teaching support for students with special educational needs. These SETs are a

wonderful resource and will significantly assist schools to support some 167,000 students with additional needs in their well-being and re-engagement with learning.

7.2.2 Some SETs support a cluster of schools i.e. they may work in a number of schools. This may need careful consideration from a public health perspective in a pandemic situation.

7.2.3 Some schools have dedicated SET rooms. Other schools use any available space, including corridors, to facilitate small group and individual SET teaching. Guidelines will be required to facilitate schools continuing to safely provide small group and individual SET teaching while adhering to any required hygiene/cleaning and social distancing regulations.

7.3 Social Distancing and Special Needs Assistants (SNAs)

7.3.1 SNAs support students with additional care needs. Many students require support with complex medical needs, complex behavioural needs and intimate care needs. Some students require movement/sensory breaks from their classes and SNAs accompany these students to play areas/sensory areas/quiet spaces, as required. Other students require support with social/ emotional and behavioural needs. Some SNAs can support a number of different students within different class groupings in a school.

7.3.2 Some of this work can be done in a socially distanced situation. However, much of it cannot. Schools will need practical advice and support in the context of managing these situations safely for both the student and SNA.

7.4 Social Distancing and School Transport

7.4.1 Students often live considerable distances from special school or schools with special classes. Special school transport arrangements – collecting the student from their home and bringing them to and from school – are an essential support for students and their families.

7.4.2 The NCSE considers that students travelling to special schools and special classes must continue to be provided with this essential service as well as for students who attend

their local school but cannot avail of the usual school bus. The non-availability of school transport would have a significant impact on families where parents need to drop other children to different schools/ commute to their own work places etc.

8. Access to In School Therapy Services

8.1 NCSE is managing an early years and in school therapy project in Kildare, South Dublin and Wicklow. This project was established in 2018 and was developed by the Departments of Education and Skills, Children and Youth Affairs, and Health with 19 Speech and Language and 12 Occupational therapists assigned to the project by the HSE. The project provided for the delivery of speech and language and occupational therapy in 75 early years and 75 school settings. The aims of the project are to provide early intervention in a school setting, develop greater links between educators and therapists, and provide professional training and guidance for school and pre-school staff and parents in supporting students' therapy and developmental needs.

8.2 As a result of the COVID 19 pandemic the majority of these therapists were re-assigned in mid-March 2020 back to HSE services, mainly to assist in swabbing and contact tracing. Currently, there is not clarity as to whether these services will continue in school and early year settings when they reopen. Students and teachers previously supported by these therapists may need additional supports to reconnect with learning if therapeutic supports are no longer available in schools.

8.3 The NCSE is concerned that the continued need for therapists within the HSE may prevent this project continuing in the next school year. This would be a very retrograde development.

9. Impact on NCSE services

9.1 Teacher Professional Learning

9.1.1 Delivery of continuing Teacher Professional Learning (TPL) is a significant challenge as a result of COVID-19 public health restrictions. Teacher professional learning seminars and support visits for teachers during March – May 2020 were cancelled.

9.1.2 Once it became clear that schools were going to remain closed but that education had to continue to be provided, NCSE immediately began to develop a suite of supports for parents and teachers. These resources, developed by our Advisors, Visiting Teachers and School Inclusion Model staff, proved very popular with both parents and teachers. New resources have been published weekly since the closure of schools and cover topics such as:

- Promoting learning and behaviour at home
- General support for learning
- Speech, Language and Communications
- Occupational therapy
- Visiting teacher support
- Theme of the week e.g. transitions, science, gardening
- App of the week.

9.1.3 Although these were well-received resources, they were not available to homes which did not have the appropriate technology. Even where homes had access to laptops, these devices may not have been adapted to the needs of their students with additional needs. In the event that schools do not fully open, it will be necessary to ensure that the appropriate technological supports and equipment are made available to families – along with training in their use – to allow for an appropriate education.

9.1.4 Our In-School support services and Visiting Teacher services were delivered by telephone, Skype and other online platforms. Two seminars were delivered online in late May / early June 2020.

9.1.5 We are currently developing a programme of TPL that will be capable of being delivered in-school or online, or a mixture of both – depending on public health advice. However, a very significant 5 day TEACCH programme will not be delivered in 2020 due to travel restrictions on staff in North Carolina University.

9.1.6 In finalising our programme of support for schools for next year, NCSE is considering:

- Learning approaches:
 - An e-Learning strategy is being developed for TPL including seminars, workshops, communities of practice, and in-school support
 - An e-Learning platform to support virtual delivery of seminars has been identified and trialled

- School capacity and priority needs for continuing TPL:
 - Prioritisation of TPL to be delivered virtually from Sept-Dec 2020 to support at both primary and post-primary level:
 - TPL to support teachers in newly established autism classes – including a modified version of the traditional four day intensive training course
 - Understanding students with different additional needs e.g. introduction to deafness, introduction to down syndrome
 - Supporting school leaders and teachers in relation to implementing the teacher allocation model
 - Supporting inclusion
 - TPL seminars to support student behaviour and social-emotional well-being

9.1.7 The NCSE is also working with other departments and agencies such as DCYA and NEPS to support students with special educational needs and their teachers.