Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs

Submission on behalf of the INTO

8 Eanáir 2014
Submission to the NCSE

Introduction

The aim of the primary curriculum is to enable all children to live a full life as a child and to realise their potential as unique individuals (DES, 1999). According to the EPSEN Act (Government of Ireland, 2004) wherever possible children with special educational needs should be educated in an inclusive environment with other children who do not have such need. All schools are inclusive schools supporting the education of all children (NCSE, 2011). The provision of learning support and resource teaching to schools supplements the work of the class teachers in educating all children and assisting all children to develop their potential.

The learning-support service is designed to ensure that all pupils achieve basic literacy and numeracy by the time they complete their primary education (DES, 2000, p. 14). According to the guidelines on learning support, effective learning support programmes are based on the principles of effective whole-school policies and parental involvement, prevention of failure; provision of intensive early intervention; and direction of resources towards pupils of greatest need (pp. 14-15). The focus of additional support should be on prevention between junior infants and second class and on early intervention from senior infants to second class. Children with special educational needs arising from disabilities, moderate learning difficulties, specific learning difficulties, or difficulties arising from behavioural or emotional disorders are also supported by the provision of additional teaching hours to schools. Children with additional language needs (EAL) or Irish language in the case of Gaeltacht schools, also require additional teaching support. Any model of allocating additional support to schools must reflect the principles of learning support and the profile of pupils in any school.

Principles

The allocation of additional support teachers to schools for learning support and resource teaching should be based on the following principles.

- All schools should be allocated core teaching support for children with special needs / learning support / language support – similar to current GAM.
- Additional support should be available to all schools based on need.
- All schools should be allocated additional resources for a fixed period of two/three years and then reviewed.
- An appeal system should be available to all schools who are not satisfied with the level of additional support that they have been allocated.
- Within each two/three year period schools should have the facility to request additional support if the educational profile of the school changes significantly.
- Any new model must be based on the principles of equality and fairness.

Transfer of Information

Processes for the transfer of information regarding special educational needs are required between pre-schools and primary schools, between junior and senior primary schools and between primary and post-primary schools.
Professional Development

CPD should be available to all staff to facilitate a deepening of knowledge and an enhancement of skills for teaching pupils with special educational needs. However, there is also a need for targeted professional development for learning support and resource teachers and sometimes for class teachers in particular aspects of teaching children with special educational needs – for example ASD. The INTO is of the view that professional postgraduate diploma and certificate courses in special education should be available to all teachers, funded by the State and in school time. The SESS should also continue to be funded and adequately resourced to respond to teachers’ professional development needs.

Identifying the needs for additional support

The educational profile of a school should take into account the profile of incoming pupils, the social profile of the school community, and the number of children assessed as having a disability – learning, physical, sensory or intellectual - during their years in primary school.

Profile of incoming pupils

- Attendance patterns
- Readiness to learn
- Language and communication skills
- Social Skills
- Ability to play
- Number of children assessed as having a disability

School Community Profile

- Employment / Unemployment
- Drugs and substance misuse
- Socio-economic status of families in the school community

Children with Special Needs

The following aspects of SEN should also be taken into account in drawing up a school’s educational profile:

- Number of pupils diagnosed with disability (intellectual, sensory, physical disabilities, ASD)
- Number of pupils assessed as needing speech & language support
- Number of children requiring behavioural intervention
- Number of children for whom English is an additional language
- Number of children with specific learning disabilities

1 The DEIS status of a school is the current mechanism for identifying the socio-economic background of a school community. However, there are schools whose profiles may have changed since DEIS was first introduced.
• Number of children with specific difficulties such as dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dyslexia
• Number of children with socio-emotional difficulties
• Number of children for whom additional support would be beneficial as assessed by psychologists, teachers, therapists,
• Number of children achieving less than the 25th percentile on standardised tests (literacy & numeracy)
• Number of children who do not take standardised tests
• Number of children assessed as needing support as indicated in tests such BIAF, NRIT
• Number of children requiring learning support in both Irish and English in Gaeltacht schools

In addition, the following factors should be taken into account:

• Number of children in the infant classes
• Gender profile of school
• Number of Travellers in the school
• Number of children in multi-grade classes
• Number of Children who are chronic absentees

Assessment

Evidence to support a child's need for additional support could include:

• Performance / achievement on standardised tests
• Performance / achievement on other tests (NRIT, BIAP)
• Records of teacher observations
• Observations / assessments of NEPS
• Assessment for disability under the Disability Act

The information from assessments should also inform the nature or type of intervention for pupils.

Outcomes

Pupils in receipt of learning support or resource teaching have an individual education/learning plan, where aspects of their educational needs are identified for intensive support. Teachers may set targets or identify desirable outcomes, in collaboration with the pupils and/or their parents and with each other. Teachers note progress on the areas targeted and report the outcomes of such progress to pupils, parents and other teachers as required. Aspects of education included in IEPs/IELPs may include social, emotional, cognitive or behavioural aspects of children’s education.

An evaluation of the model of support for children with special educational needs should take place periodically, perhaps every 10 years.
**Reporting**

Teachers report to pupils, their parents and to their colleagues in relation to the progress of pupils with special education needs. From a system perspective, the work of the learning support and resource teachers is inspected as part of whole school evaluations. How additional teaching resources are used in schools is commented upon in inspectors’ reports. The school staff will also include the work of the SEN team in their self-evaluation processes. It is the view of the INTO that there is no need for further reporting.

**A New Model**

Any new model must avoid an increase in workload and bureaucracy at school level, must be transparent, and easy to update as school profiles change. Consideration will need to be given to re-introducing posts of responsibility to enable schools to appoint co-ordinators for special education within schools. Any new model should provide a number of additional teaching supports to schools. The school principal should have the autonomy and responsibility for deploying the additional teaching resources to best meet the special educational needs of pupils within the school. The new model to be proposed by NCSE should be tested and piloted in a number of schools with different profiles prior to its introduction nationally.

The General Allocation Model could be modified, where some special needs, currently supported by resource teachers could be supported through an enhanced general allocation model. The number of GAM teachers allocated to schools should be increased to reflect the increased number of children with special educational needs to be accommodated under GAM. The INTO suggests a ratio of 0.25 per class. DEIS Band One schools should be allocated an additional 0.25 for every 5 teachers, or part thereof. DEIS Band Two schools and rural DEIS schools should be allocated an additional 0.25 per every 10 teachers, or part thereof. Resource teaching hours should continue be allocated to schools based on the needs of children who have been assessed as having low-incidence special educational needs – e.g. moderate learning disabilities, ASD. The number of assessments carried out by NEPS would need to be increased. The difference between GAM and Resource teachers should be discontinued and schools allowed combine hours under GAM and hours granted following assessments to appoint teachers.

The benefits of this approach are that teachers are familiar with the process, and the need for assessments is reduced.

An alternative approach is to design a new model based on a weighting system, where each pupil in a school is allocated points according to need. The school’s points then determine the number of SEN teachers. Under this model there would still be a need for some assessments. However, teachers’ judgements would also need to be taken into account. The principal would have responsibility for the deployment of teaching resources to best meet the children’s needs. However, any revised model should not create additional burdens for principal teachers. The INTO is willing to discuss possibilities pertaining to a weighting system with the NCSE.