



**INTO Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee
on Education and Skills**

7 June 2018

Provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools

1. Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education on Skills on the *Provision of ASD and Special Classes in mainstream schools*.

As inclusive education has evolved in more recent years, an increasing number of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) are now enrolled in Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and Special Classes within mainstream schools. Consequently, ASD and Special Classes have developed to become an integral and essential part of the Irish education system. It is important that the State continues to offer a range of provision in order to ensure that children obtain the best possible education in a setting that suits their needs. The INTO believes that all schools are inclusive schools including Special Schools and schools with ASD and Special Classes. Inclusive education does not necessarily mean that all pupils must be enrolled in mainstream classes. The INTO believes that a range of options must continue to be available to parents.

The maintenance of a continuum of provision to include ASD and Special Classes is essential to ensure that the educational needs of all children are met. The INTO is fully supportive of a policy of inclusion, where it is in the best interests of the child and where resources are provided to meet the needs of the child. We must always be mindful of the potential effect on the child and class teacher of having a child who is either misplaced in a mainstream setting or for whom the back-up support services are not being provided for by the State. An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through the provision of resources, support and therapeutic services and professional development creates significant challenges for pupils and teachers.

2. Setting Up Special Classes

The INTO advocates better planning across the system for the establishment of ASD and Special Classes to ensure all pupils have access irrespective of demographics or geographical location. While NCSE and NEPS should work with schools around the establishment of special classes, offering relevant support, advice and encouragement, the INTO is of the view that the Board of Management of a school should retain the autonomy to decide whether to establish a Special Class based on the school's individual context and circumstances at a given time. Establishing a Special Class in a school against the interests of the school community is likely to be counter-productive and could lead to a negative atmosphere both in the school and class, which would not be in the best interest of the pupils. Boards of Management should consult

with staff prior to making such decisions, because the decision to establish a special class in a school changes the teaching context of a school.

A tension exists at present for schools regarding the protocol for admitting pupils to ASD and Special Classes. In order to access a special class a student must have a report from a relevant professional or team of professionals, for example, psychologist, speech and language therapist, psychiatrist (NCSE, 2016, p.3). Some professionals, however, are reluctant to state this on the grounds that school selection is a matter of parental choice. The INTO believes that this conflict should be clarified as it leads to confusion and delays for parents and schools in accessing the best possible setting for a pupil.

3. Supporting Principals

The INTO welcomes the publication of the *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes (NCSE, 2016)* for Boards of Management and Principals of schools. The INTO also notes with positivity the proposals as set out in the NCSE's *Policy Advice on the Education of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2015)* proposing that professional development opportunities should be made available for principal teachers, particularly in relation to setting up and managing special classes.

Establishing and managing ASD and Special Classes creates an additional administrative workload on principal teachers. The INTO recommends that additional administrative days should be granted to teaching principals for the establishment and maintenance of ASD and Special Classes. It was regrettable that this issue was not addressed in the recent publication of Circular 0040/2018 *Release Time for Principal Teachers in Primary Schools*. There is a significant workload associated with leading and managing a special class and this task is particularly onerous for teaching principals. In light of the additional administration and staff management associated with ASD and Special Classes, the INTO recommends a further reduction of the point at which administrative principalships are granted to schools with ASD classes.

In addition, the INTO recommends full time qualified school secretaries should be available to all schools with ASD and Special Classes. The role of secretaries in schools with ASD and Special Classes has become more complex with increasing demands for data gathering and liaising with relevant ancillary service. Such tasks often fall to the principal teacher in the absence of sufficient administrative support, thereby increasing their workload.

4. Transitions

Collaborative multidisciplinary assessment should be readily available in a pre-school setting to increase early intervention. Schools should be better supported with the transition of

children with SEN from pre-school to primary and primary to post-primary level. Protocols should be agreed around the transfer of information and continuity of support to ensure that there is no gap in the provision of resources. It is regrettable that the increase in Special Classes at primary level is not matched by a corresponding increase in Special Class provision at second level. This creates significant difficulties for pupils transferring from primary to post-primary, particularly those who require a continuity of experience and support.

5. Professional Development

Following the recent re-conceptualisation of initial teacher education programmes, all graduates now complete modules on inclusive education. However, initial teacher education in inclusive education must be built upon throughout a teacher's career and all teachers should be given the opportunity to engage in professional development in relation to inclusion and special educational needs. The national framework for teacher professional development, *Cosán*, should include special education and ensure access to CPD in education for ASD for all teachers. The national framework should also address issues such as funding and resourcing of ongoing teacher professional development.

The INTO believes that induction and ongoing professional development are necessary for teachers working in special education settings. In that regard, the INTO welcomes the NCSE recommendation that special class teachers should be supported to engage in appropriate learning opportunities to ensure they have the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary to be a special class teacher (NCSE, 2016). Access to continuous professional development must be sustained on an ongoing basis to ensure teachers are supported in current and best practice. However, adequate resources, including substitution cover, must be in place to allow teachers to engage with professional development prior to the establishment of Special Classes. In particular, teachers would value more opportunities for professional development in the form of summer courses to ensure that they are prepared in advance of their placement in a Special Class in September. Furthermore, teachers should also have the opportunity to visit other special classes to see, at first hand, how these classes operate. Again, substitution cover and time must be in place so that visits or liaison with these schools can be accommodated.

The *Regional Support Service*, currently being established by the NCSE, has great potential to offer initial and ongoing support to schools with ASD and Special Classes. The INTO believes that qualified teachers with additional expertise in special education should form the core of the *Regional Support Services* if the service is to offer advice, support and professional development to teachers.

6. SNAs

Professional development and training should also be available to SNAs in relation to supporting all pupils with special educational needs, particularly pupils in ASD and Special Classes. Sufficient funding should be granted to schools for this purpose. Consideration should also be given to extending the remit of the SESS to include the provision of professional development and training for SNAs.

In the context of supporting integration and inclusion, the INTO recommends that adequate SNA support is available for pupils who attend ASD and Special Classes to integrate and transition smoothly into mainstream settings on a gradual basis.

7. Multidisciplinary Supports

Pupils who access ASD and Special Classes have unique additional needs that require specific therapeutic support that is often beyond the remit of the teacher. The lack of availability of in-school, multi-disciplinary supports is a major weakness in the system at present. The expectation gap between schools and the HSE needs to be closed and a clear policy developed regarding the provision of therapeutic services to schools. It is imperative that the DES and their counterparts in the Department of Health and Department of Children and Youth Affairs devise a model to enable children attending school to be provided with the therapeutic services they require, preferably on an in-school arrangement. It is unacceptable that, due to the lack of therapists, teachers are being asked to take on the duties of other professionals, such as Speech and Language Therapists or Occupational Therapists. The INTO welcomes the commitment by the Government to pilot a model of in-school speech and language therapy, and further recommends that other therapies should be available onsite at school also. The INTO further notes and supports a recommendation in the *Review of the SNA Scheme* which proposes that ring-fenced funding should be provided for the development of an in-school therapy service (NCSE, 2018. P.6).

A stronger interdepartmental approach with an improved communication system is essential for educational planning to ensure that services are delivered in a coherent and unified way. Unless an adequate level of funding is provided by the DES and / or the Department of Health inclusion cannot succeed. The NCSE *Regional Support Service* should provide the opportunity needed for a co-ordinated set of support services to be offered to schools to support special education provision.

8. Crisis Situations

Guidelines for schools and teachers in relation to dealing with crisis situations are urgently required, particularly in relation to developing emergency procedures for crisis situations arising from incidences of challenging behaviour and violent outbursts. Teachers and principal teachers are increasingly reporting serious incidence that threaten the health and safety of staff and other pupils in mainstream, ASD and Special Classes. It is vital to fully implement all aspects of the EPSEN Act (2004) including the clauses in the Act that seek to protect the rights of other pupils in a class to an education that is not impacted negatively from a policy of inclusion.

Teachers find it extremely difficult to respond to episodes of challenging behaviour without access to the necessary clinical and therapeutic advice. In that regard, the INTO is of the view that the current support offered by the National Behaviour Support Service to post-primary schools should be extended to primary schools without delay. Guidelines must also be provided which would include advice and support around restrictive practices and restraint in extreme circumstances where the health and safety of other pupils and staff members is being compromised. The publication of guidelines should be accompanied by CPD and should have legal standing to protect school staff and pupils. Teachers need to be protected from any potential accusations of assault where they intervene in situations where pupils are a danger to themselves or others. Teachers are *in loco parentis* and should be treated accordingly when intervening in crisis situations.

The availability of a temporary, alternative environment may be necessary if a child is particularly distressed or demonstrating extremely violent behaviour. While it is laudable that there should be provision in schools for the facility of a quiet space to meet students' sensory needs, extra funding needs to be granted to schools for this purpose. Currently the schools with only one Special Class receive fewer ancillary rooms than schools with two or more Special Classes. The INTO believes that all schools with Special Classes should be provided with a quiet room, a soft room and small hall facilities irrespective of the number of Special Classes attached to the school. Moreover, the provision of sensory spaces and quiet rooms should become an integral feature of school design for all new schools.

9. Concluding Comments

Teachers are to the fore in making inclusion a reality in mainstream, ASD and Special Classes. The DES and the NCSE need to acknowledge and address their needs and experiences, including their health and safety needs and their need for professional development. For a policy of inclusion to be successful teachers in ASD and Special Classes must be supported

with professional development opportunities, multi-disciplinary services and adequate resources and facilities.

The INTO is engaged in ongoing consultation with teachers and principal teachers to ascertain views on the provision of ASD and Special Classes. The INTO will further explore these views and issues at its biennial Special Education Conference in March 2019.

The INTO strongly believes that ASD and Special Classes can, and must, continue to provide an essential part of the continuum of provision for children with special educational needs. The Organisation looks forward to engaging in more detailed discussions on the issues arising from the provision of ASD and Special Classes.

References

NCSE (2015) *Policy Advice on the Education of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder*

NCSE (2016) *Guidelines for Setting Up and Organising Special Classes*