

NCSE POLICY ADVICE

Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools

A Guide for Parents/Guardians and Students

NCSE 2016



The word 'parent' in this document should be taken to include guardians of children.

Contents

Introduction	2
What did we do?	3
What did we find?	4
Table 1: Some Key Recommendations	6
How will children and young people with ASD benefit if the NCSE recommendations are implemented?	11
Frequently Asked Questions	12

Introduction

The NCSE works towards achieving a society where students with special educational needs, including those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), receive an education that enables them to achieve their potential.

One of our key roles is to provide expert, independent, evidence-informed policy advice on special education to the Minister for Education and Skills. In late 2013, we were asked to advise on how students with ASD should be supported in schools.

We submitted our advice to the Minister in September 2015 and this booklet is a guide for parents on our key findings and recommendations.

What did we do?

- We commissioned two independent research studies, led by university academics, to ensure that our advice was evidence-informed. One study evaluated current educational provision for students with ASD in Irish schools; the other reviewed international literature and practice. Both of these studies are available on the NCSE website at: www.ncse.ie.
- We read and considered findings from a wide range of other national and international research studies on ASD, many of which were brought to our attention by people we consulted.
- We consulted widely with the education partners. This included parents, students, principals, teachers, special needs assistants (SNAs), special educational needs organisers (SENsOs), school management bodies, advocacy bodies, psychologists and so on. We also invited parents, teachers, principals and other experts to speak to our Council.
- We visited many schools that had enrolled students with ASD and spoke to parents, students and teachers to hear, at first hand, about their experiences.

What did we find?

Some 14,000¹ students (1.55% of all students) in Irish schools have been diagnosed with ASD. While this is an increased prevalence rate when compared with previous Irish studies, it is in line with recent prevalence rates in other countries such as the US and UK. Since the publication of the report of the Task Force on Autism (2001), good progress has been made in the education of students with ASD to the point where now:

- Students with ASD are generally supported well in schools and the right supports are in place for them
- Students' experience of education is generally positive, particularly in primary schools – there is scope for further development in post-primary schools
- Substantial resources are in place – every year about €300 million is spent on additional supports for students with ASD.

¹ All data in the policy advice paper relate to the 2014-2015 school year, unless otherwise stated.

- The range and quality of school placements have improved:
 - 86% of students with ASD are enrolled in mainstream schools of which:
 - 63% attend mainstream classes
 - 23% attend special classes in mainstream schools
 - 14% attend special schools
- Almost 950 special classes are in place for students with ASD between mainstream and special schools – up from 77 such classes in 2001
- 2,500 additional teachers are in schools specifically to support students with ASD
- Teachers are more knowledgeable about ASD and its impact on students' learning.

While good progress has been made, we found that there is still room for improvement...

Overall we made 11 recommendations aimed at bringing about improvements in educational provision for students with ASD. Some of our main recommendations are set out in a table over the next few pages.

A detailed account of all our findings and recommendations is available in the policy advice paper available on our website at: www.ncse.ie.

Table 1: Some Key Recommendations

Support for Children Aged 0-3 Years	
Why is improvement required?	Our recommendation
Many parents find it very difficult when their children's developmental needs are identified because they don't know what to do to help their children to grow and develop and they don't know where to go for support.	Early childhood development specialists should be available to advise and support parents and families – from when children's developmental needs are identified, through pre-school and through the transition to primary school.

Support for Pre-School Children Aged 3 Years +	
Why is improvement required?	Our recommendation
<p>A very important part of how all young children develop is that they mix with and learn from other children. Placing young children with ASD in segregated pre-school classes means that they don't have the opportunity to learn from other typically developing children and this may not always be in their best interest.</p> <p>In addition, parents are confused by the number of different pre-school schemes that exist for young children with ASD – all of which have different staffing arrangements, supports and eligibility conditions.</p>	There should be one appropriately resourced national pathway up to, and including, pre-schools. Children then can have the opportunity to learn and develop together. Parents will understand the support available for their children with ASD, from what point this support is provided and where it is delivered. ²

² Since the NCSE policy advice was finalised, the Government announced additional funding to support access for children with disabilities to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme from September 2016. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs will oversee the implementation of the new model which includes:

- enhanced continuing professional development for early years practitioners
- grants for equipment, appliances and minor alterations
- increased capitation for certain complex cases
- access to therapeutic intervention.

Health Supports

Why is improvement required?

Access to health supports, including diagnostic services, occupational therapy, psychology, speech and language therapy, is not currently available, to the extent needed, for children with ASD.

Children with ASD need to have sufficient and consistent access to these health supports, where they are required.

Our recommendation

The Government should provide for sufficient ring-fenced resources to ensure that an adequate level of multidisciplinary health supports (including speech and language therapy) is available, where required, for students with complex special educational needs, including some students with ASD.

Education Supports for School-Aged Students

Teacher Education

Why is improvement required?

Initial Teacher Education does not sufficiently equip teachers with all the knowledge and skills they need to educate all students with more complex special educational needs. For this, they need further training and experience after they have graduated.

Similarly, not all experienced teachers have had the opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills. This includes being able to identify students' individual learning needs; planning and implementing evidence-informed learning programmes to meet these needs; and recording and monitoring progress and outcomes.

Our recommendation

- Appropriate training programmes should be funded and available to ensure that all teachers (and principals) can acquire the requisite knowledge and skills to educate students with ASD, whether in mainstream or special settings.
- Teachers should have a minimum of three years' teaching experience (post-probation) before taking up a position in a special setting for students with ASD to allow time for development and upskilling.

Education Supports for School-Aged Students

Training for Non-Teaching Personnel

Why is improvement required?

Students with ASD need all personnel to adopt the same approaches to understanding and managing behaviour. Everyone working with these students needs to be aware of individual triggers that can cause students to become upset or can lead to emotional outbursts or episodes of challenging behaviour.

Our recommendation

- The DES should arrange for the development of mandatory training programmes for all SNAs.
- Other personnel working with students with ASD should also receive training, (for example, bus escorts, drivers and caretakers) to develop a common basic understanding of ASD.

Education Supports for School-Aged Students

Educational Psychologists

Why is improvement required?

Schools need advice from educational psychologists to guide them on how to: identify students' learning needs; devise and implement appropriate learning programmes; promote positive behaviour and manage challenging behaviour should it arise.

Parents need advice from educational psychologists to assist them to choose schools for their children with ASD and to support their children's education while in school.

There are not enough educational psychologists in schools to provide an adequate service to support schools and parents in these ways.

Our recommendation

An expansion in psychological services for schools to enable psychologists to:

- Deliver a quality service to students in special and mainstream settings
- Provide advice on educational placements for students with complex special educational needs.

Education Supports for School-Aged Students

Appropriate Models of Support for Post-Primary Aged Students

Why is improvement required?

Our recommendation

Full-time, post-primary teachers are required to teach for 22 hours every week. In some post-primary schools, resource teaching hours are given to subject teachers purely because they have spare capacity. This doesn't take account of their skill or expertise in teaching students with complex learning needs or the needs of the students concerned.

- The DES should ensure that, before taking up resource teaching posts/hours, post-primary subject teachers attend appropriate training programmes to equip them with the skills necessary to meet the needs of students with complex learning needs.

There is confusion in the post-primary system about the purpose and role of special classes for students with ASD resulting in some students being placed in special classes when they could manage in supported mainstream classes. These students may then not have access to the full range of curricular options, including Irish, which can have implications for students' career and post-school options.

- More able students with ASD should be educated in supported mainstream classes and only those with more complex needs should be educated in a special class.

Some students with ASD find it very difficult to manage the transition to post-primary school which involves different subjects, greater numbers of teachers, larger buildings, new rules, lockers, timetables and so on.

- Post-primary schools should be allocated additional hours for a teacher to coordinate educational programmes across mainstream and special classes and to assist the transition of students with ASD from primary to post-primary school.

Post-School Provision

Why is improvement required?

Meaningful and appropriate post-school options, in education, training or adult services, are not available for all students with ASD to attend.

Our recommendation

Post-school education, training and adult services options need to be reviewed by all Government Departments, working together, to ensure sufficient and appropriate placements are available for students with ASD.

We believe these recommendations, if implemented, will make a real difference to educational provision for students with ASD.

How will children and young people with ASD benefit if the NCSE recommendations are implemented?

If our recommendations are implemented, we are confident that children and young people with ASD will benefit by having:

- Better outcomes from pre-school because there will be inclusive, well-resourced pre-schools with highly qualified and experienced staff who have access to early childhood development specialists
- Better outcomes from school because teachers and school leaders will be knowledgeable, skilled and have a better understanding of ASD and be better equipped to identify and meet students' learning needs
- A whole school response where school personnel (SNAs, bus escorts, caretakers etc.) will have a better understanding of ASD and be better able to support students with ASD
- A post-primary model of provision that makes the best use of resources for students with special educational needs
- Better support for schools as a result of expanded health and psychology services.

Frequently Asked Questions

If the NCSE proposals are accepted:

1. What will be available for pre-school children with ASD?

Pre-school children with ASD will be welcome and included in their local mainstream preschool which will be resourced to meet their needs. Pre-school teachers will have the necessary experience and qualifications to work with young children with ASD. Early childhood development specialists will be available to advise and support parents and preschool teachers from the time children's difficulties are identified.

It will take time and investment to put these supports in place so the new system will have to be phased in over a number of years. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) has already started to plan for supporting the access of children with disabilities, including children with ASD, to the ECCE programme from September 2016.

2. What will be different for students with ASD in school?

Students with ASD will have better educational outcomes because their teachers will be trained to identify and assess their learning needs, choose evidence-informed interventions to meet their needs and monitor and review their progress.

Other school-related personnel, (such as SNAs, bus drivers, care-takers) will be better able to support students with ASD because they will have a clearer understanding of ASD and the impact it can have on the student.

Parents will make more informed choices about choosing schools for children with ASD because there will be more professional support and advice available to them.

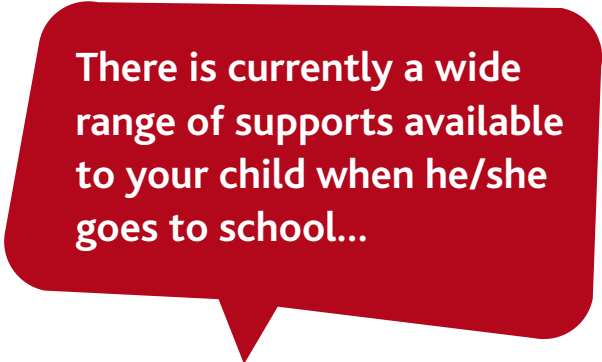
Students with ASD will be less anxious when making transitions between settings (pre-school to primary school, primary to post-primary and onwards from post-primary) because there will be more support available to them.

Students with ASD will have greater access to necessary health supports during their pre-school and school-aged years.

3. Are some educational interventions better than others for my child?

Every child with ASD is different, has individual learning needs, and therefore may need an individualised educational response that meets these needs. Some children with ASD need help with developing social skills, others with behaviour, and others with learning. Some children may need help with all of these areas and require a programme based on a number of different interventions. Some children will respond better to certain interventions than others.

We have identified interventions that teachers can draw on, knowing that they are evidence-informed. We have advised that all teachers should be trained to know when to use these and other effective teaching methodologies.



There is currently a wide range of supports available to your child when he/she goes to school...

4. Will the NCSE's proposals make any difference to teachers' training or qualifications to work with students with ASD?

Yes, if accepted our proposals will make a difference. Teachers will have at least three years' teaching experience before taking up a position in a special class. This will allow time for teachers to develop and upskill in the area of teaching generally and more specifically in the area of special educational needs. They will also have to receive further training before taking up their teaching position in a specialist role or setting for students with ASD.

Comprehensive programmes of professional learning in ASD will be available for teachers in mainstream primary and post-primary classes, teachers in special schools and special classes and teachers in specialist roles. These programmes will be tailored to the particular needs of each cohort of teachers.

Training programmes and mentoring will also be available to school leaders to provide up-to-date knowledge and understanding of students with ASD.

Schools will be supported and resourced to enable them to promote positive behaviour and to manage challenging behaviour should the need arise.

Appropriate training should be available to ensure that teachers have the necessary knowledge and understanding of students with ASD.

The Teaching Council will have clearly set out the knowledge, skills, understandings and competencies that teachers need to enable students with ASD receive an education appropriate to their needs and abilities.

5. Does the policy advice refer to July provision?

The policy advice acknowledges that parents really value July provision because it provides a day-time break for parents and families and a structured day for students with ASD for part of the summer holidays.

We found however that the scheme could lead to risky and dangerous environments for students and staff where new teachers and SNAs are recruited who are not familiar with students' behavioural or medical needs.

We consider that the scheme could also be open to challenge on the grounds of equity. Students are eligible for July provision on the basis of a diagnosis of ASD or severe/profound general learning disabilities. However, other students with significant intellectual disabilities might also benefit from an extended school year and do not qualify under the terms of the scheme.

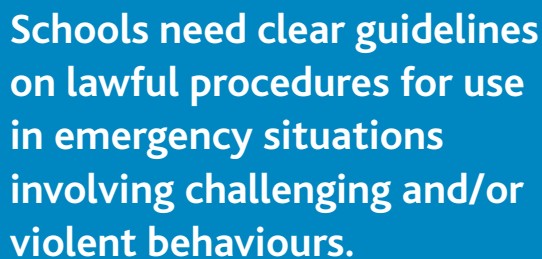
We recommended the scheme be replaced and an alternative plan developed to provide a structured, safe, social environment where students with complex special educational needs can continue their academic and social programmes for one month of the summer holidays.

We know that this is a difficult task and it is likely to take some time before this plan is fully developed and implemented. In the meantime, we advised that boards of management (in the case of school-based provision) and parents (in the case of home-based provision) should be satisfied that adequate supervision arrangements are in place to ensure the welfare and safety of students and staff participating in the scheme.

6. What does the NCSE advice say about the use of time out³ rooms for students with ASD?

The NCSE advises that challenging and/or violent behaviour in schools is not necessarily linked to special educational needs but is a broader, societal issue. It is only a minority of students, who may or may not have special educational needs, who demonstrate seriously challenging or violent behaviours in school settings. We recommended that the DES should prepare and issue clear guidelines to schools on emergency procedures to be used to manage such situations. The DES should obtain legal advice to ensure that the guidelines are lawful so that schools can be certain of the legal position.

We found no evidence that the use of seclusion or restraint provides any educational or therapeutic benefit to students with ASD and so time out rooms should not be used for these students. However, many students with ASD benefit from a quiet space where they can go for a break to avoid sensory overload and/or to regulate their behaviour or emotions and these breaks should be provided. These breaks should be sensitively managed and supervised, as part of the student's educational plan.



Schools need clear guidelines on lawful procedures for use in emergency situations involving challenging and/or violent behaviours.

³ In the context of the NCSE policy advice, time-out rooms refer to spaces which are used to involuntarily confine a student alone in a room or area which the student is physically prevented from leaving. This includes situations where a door is locked as well as where the door is blocked by other objects or held closed by staff – regardless of the intended purpose or the names applied to this procedure and the place where the student is secluded.

