



**Submission to
Department of Education and Skills, Special Education Section**

Policy Advice on the Education of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

On behalf of the INTO

15 December 2016

Introduction

The INTO welcomes the opportunity to respond to the NCSE's policy advice 'Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Schools'. The objectives of the policy advice are laudable in seeking to ensure that all children with ASD are enabled to to achieve their full potential.

The INTO has long advocated the need for improvements to educational provision for students with ASD. Many of the recommendations in this paper echo those made in the report 'ASD – Educational Provision for Pupils with Autism Spectrum Disorder' (INTO, 2002). In a response submission to the NSCE paper 'Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs' (2014), the INTO called for increased emphasis on early intervention, targeted professional development relating to ASD and improvements regarding the transfer of information process. It is positive to note that these areas are addressed in this policy advice, though it is regrettable that it took so long. While there are challenges associated with some of the recommendations made in this paper, the INTO looks forward to engaging in further discussions on these proposals.

While generally supportive of the principles underpinning the policy advice, the INTO urges caution in interpreting the first principle which states that, "students, irrespective of the severity of ASD and/or cognitive ability, are welcome and able to enrol in their local schools". The experience of primary teachers is that the local school is not always the best place for all pupils. The statement on page 37 reflects this point, and the maintenance of the continuum of provision to include special schools 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 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 by the State. The State and its agencies have a responsibility for the health and safety of both pupils and teachers, regardless of educational setting. An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through the provision of resources, support and therapeutic services and professional development places an intolerable burden on teachers. The INTO supports the call for the full implementation of the EPSEN Act (2004). It is vital that the clauses in the Act, that seek to protect the rights of other pupils in a class to an education is not impacted upon negatively arising from a policy of inclusion of pupils with Special Needs, are enacted.

Prevalence Rate

The INTO supports the recommendation that DES should adopt an ASD prevalence rate of 1.55% for educational planning purposes. However, it is vital that the resources to match this prevalence rate are available. It is not possible to promote a policy of inclusion without the appropriate supports and resources. In the absence of the

supports and resources, it is very frustrating for class teachers who are responsible for making inclusion a reality in their classrooms. Unsupported inclusion places an unfair and intolerable burden on teachers.

Pre-School

The proposal that the government should assign responsibility to a lead Department for the provision of one unified pre-school system warrants careful consideration. The INTO is strongly of the view that the Early Start Programme, Early Intervention Classes for ASD and the Rutland Street Project should remain under the responsibility of the DES.

The INTO agrees that collaborative multidisciplinary assessment should be readily available in a pre-school setting to increase early intervention for children with ASD. Protocols around the transfer of information and supports for children with ASD from pre-schools to primary school must be developed to ensure that there is no gap in the provision of resources.

It is the opinion of the INTO that all staff working with children with ASD should be highly qualified, with qualifications appropriate to their roles, and have access to relevant training and professional development in order to ensure high quality education.

School-Aged Provision

Inclusive admissions policies

The INTO supports the concept that, “all schools are inclusive schools supporting the education of all children” (NCSE, 2011). Special schools are also inclusive schools. All policy in the area of special education and inclusion should acknowledge and support the continuum of provision, from special school, to special class and to mainstream setting.

There is a lack of appropriate placements for pupils with ASD across the continuum of provision. The INTO advocates better planning across the system for educational provision for pupils with ASD. The INTO opposes the recommendation that the NCSE should have the authority to instruct a school to open a special class. 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. 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 should retain the autonomy to decide whether to establish a special class following a request from the NCSE. Boards of management should consult with staff

prior to making such decisions, because the decision to establish an ASD class in a school changes the teaching context of a school.

The INTO acknowledges the supportive role that NEPS provides to schools. This support is valued by schools, however, NEPS have yet to be fully resourced to meet the needs of all schools, as outlined in the original proposal which led to the establishment of NEPS. Therefore, NEPS is stretched and the level of support available to schools is insufficient in many cases due to staff shortages. An increase in the allocation of NEPS services to schools is required.

Staffing Matters

The INTO welcomes the proposal to grant additional administrative days to teaching principals for the establishment and maintenance of an ASD class. There is a significant workload associated with leading and managing a special class and this task is particularly onerous for teaching principals. In the context of supporting inclusion, the INTO recommends that additional release time also be available to teaching principals where a large number of children with ASD are in mainstream classes. In addition, the INTO recommends a reduction of the point at which administrative principalships are granted to schools with ASD classes. Full time qualified school secretaries should be available to all schools. The role of school secretaries has become more complex with increasing demands for data gathering and form filling. Such tasks often fall to the principal teacher in the absence of sufficient administrative support, thereby increasing their workload.

Redeployment Panel

In the opinion of the INTO, the recommendations regarding teachers on the redeployment panel are problematic. The proposed changes could deny teachers with an interest in special education of the opportunity to work in a special setting. There is a system in place at present whereby teachers on the panel can indicate their interest in special education. The INTO views this procedure as sufficient and feels that there should be no change to the redeployment panel in this regard.

The INTO believes that professional development and training must be available to teachers who secure a post in an ASD setting prior to taking up appointment. Additional professional development and training must also be available following deployment to a special class for pupils with ASD.

The INTO recommends that there should be greater flexibility around ratios in special classes for ASD. Some classes could benefit from additional teaching support while others may benefit from additional SNA support.

Substitution Register

A register of substitute teachers available to work in special settings would be useful but such registers are usually compiled locally. If the Teaching Council were to take

responsibility for substitution registers, such responsibility should not be confined to holding registers in the area of special education only. The Teaching Council has a responsibility to advise on teacher supply but the INTO is of the view that maintaining registers of substitute teachers is not a function of the Teaching Council.

Curriculum

The INTO is a strong advocate of a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils, including children with special educational needs. Children with ASD should not be denied opportunities to pursue a range of post-school options, therefore, a broad curriculum experience is important.

The INTO welcomes the recommendation that the long-awaited procedures and protocols around exemptions from Irish are reviewed, updated and clarified. In the context of the new integrated language curriculum, clarity is required on the purposes and expectations around the granting of exemptions from learning Irish for some students.

Developing teacher knowledge, skills, understandings and competency

Following the recent reconceptualisation 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. However, professional development in special education, including the national diploma in special education (as per Circular 04/2016) should be available for all teachers and not only for teachers in special education settings.

Professional development and training should also be available to SNAs in relation to supporting all pupils with special educational needs, particularly pupils with ASD.

The INTO welcomes proposals regarding professional development for principal teachers, particularly in relation to setting up and managing special classes.

The Inclusion Support Service (ISS) has great potential to offer support to schools regarding the education of children with ASD and other special educational needs. 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.

Qualified teachers with additional expertise in special education should form the core of the Inclusion Support Service if the service is to offer advice, support and professional development to teachers. The INTO also recommends that Visiting Teachers for pupils with ASD be appointed as part of the Inclusion Support Service.

Educational Interventions for Students with ASD

The Inclusion Support Service (ISS) must be sufficiently resourced to support and advise teachers in relation to selecting the most suitable educational interventions for pupils with ASD. Without the adequate level of resources the ISS will be totally incapable of carrying out its functions.

The INTO acknowledges that the Middletown Centre for Autism provides valuable support to teachers regarding the education of children with ASD. Education interventions should be research-informed, and opportunities provided to teachers to be informed about the various interventions available, to enable them to select the most appropriate interventions for their own context and circumstances. It is important that teachers have evidence of the suitability of interventions in particular circumstances so that they can make an informed decision based on the situation and individual needs of the child.

Other Educational Supports

Special Needs Assistants

The INTO supports a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme which should evaluate the potential of SNAs in supporting the care and education of children with ASD and other special educational needs.

Continuing professional development (CPD) for school-related staff

The INTO agrees that specific training for SNAs working in an ASD setting would be useful. Sufficient funding should be granted to schools for this purpose. Consideration should be given to extending the remit of the SESS to include the provision of professional development and training for SNAs.

A general training course in ASD for other personnel in schools would be valuable for developing knowledge and understanding of ASD.

Special Transport Scheme

It is the INTO's view that the school transport scheme should continue to be part of the service for children with special needs.

Technology-aided instruction

The Middletown Centre for Autism is a valuable resource for advising schools in the area of technology for use with students with ASD. Teachers should have support in choosing appropriate equipment.

Capitation Grants

It is noted that there is no recommendation for increased capitation grants for children with ASD in a mainstream setting. It is not possible to provide a sufficient level of support to children with ASD in a mainstream setting without adequate resources and funding. The INTO believes that ASD students in mainstream education should be granted the same level of enhanced capitation that exists for ASD students in a special setting. Furthermore, the INTO is of the view that the general capitation and special capitation grants should not only be restored, but increased overall.

Furniture and equipment

The INTO agrees that schools should be sufficiently funded through the special education element of the minor works grant to allow for the deterioration of furniture and equipment that can result from incidents of challenging behaviour.

Extended School Year Scheme

The INTO supports the retention of the extended year scheme and welcomes the recommendation to review its purpose and operation. At present, according to our members, there is subtle pressure on principals to be on site during summer provision, and there can be difficulty recruiting experienced teachers. Operational issues pertaining to summer provision are a responsibility of the DES and not a responsibility of school principals during their school holidays. Payment for teachers who work in July is not received until November. Any review of July provision should also review the payment dates. It is unacceptable that teachers should have to wait for more than three months to obtain payment due to them.

The Extended School Year scheme needs an urgent review. Issues such as organisation, purpose, funding and the role of teachers and schools need to be reconsidered. It is the INTO's view that summer provision should continue in a reconceptualised form and be extended to include a greater number of children with special educational needs. The INTO is open to engaging with the NCSE and DES to contribute to discussions on the possible structure of a revised scheme.

Multidisciplinary Supports

The lack of availability of multi-disciplinary supports is a major weakness in the system currently. 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 HSE and DCYA devise a model to enable children attending school to be provided with the therapeutic services they require, preferably in school. It is unacceptable that, due to the lack of therapists, teachers are being asked to take on the role of therapists, such as Speech and Language Therapists or Occupational therapists. Funding has to be available through DES or HSE to provide health related therapies to pupils in schools. The prospect of on-site speech and language therapy for children with ASD in a school is viewed as a particularly helpful resource and the INTO is of the view that there other therapies should be available onsite at school also. Support services are currently disconnected. A stronger interdepartmental approach with an improved communication system is essential for educational planning. Unless an adequate level of funding is provided by the DES and / or the HSE, inclusion cannot succeed.

The INTO supports the recommendation that the HSE should provide clear information to parents detailing the support their child is receiving and advice on how to aid their child's development.

Transition

Schools should be 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.

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. Teachers find it extremely difficult to respond to episodes of challenging behaviour without access to the necessary clinical and therapeutic advice. The guidelines should include advice and support around restrictive practices and restraint. The publication of guidelines should be accompanied by staff training and should have legal standing. 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 INTO notes that it is recommended that NEPS lead the process of developing guidelines, however, it is important that teachers are consulted as part of the process. These guidelines are a priority and work should commence immediately on developing them.

The availability of a temporary, alternative environment may be necessary if a child is regularly 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 with children with ASD for this purpose. The provision of sensory spaces should become an integral feature of school design for all new schools. Quiet spaces and sensory areas should be equipped with resources to meet the needs of children with ASD. Increased personnel and the provision of relevant training is also necessary. Without the provision of these resources the vision for inclusion won't be achieved.

Support for Families

The INTO supports the recommendation that access to HSE multidisciplinary services should be available on an ongoing basis to provide supports to children with ASD and also to advise parents. Accessible training should be in place for parents and families of children with ASD also.

The INTO supports the view that it is helpful that schools should inform parents about educational approaches being used and to involve parents as much as possible in their child's education. Teachers generally do this as a matter of course.

A comprehensive plan for respite should be developed to support parents including the provision of transport as recommended in the policy advice.

Concluding comments

The INTO is supportive of many of the recommendations in this policy advice. The child-centred principles underpinning this paper are evident throughout. There are many positive proposals that would greatly enhance the education of children with ASD if implemented appropriately. Class teachers are to the fore in making inclusion a reality in schools. The DES and the NCSE need to acknowledge and address their needs and experiences, including their health and safety needs and their needs regarding professional development. For a policy of inclusion to be successful class teachers must be supported.

Some recommendations, such as the proposal for a unified pre-school system, changes to the redeployment panel and admissions policies will need much further consideration. The issues of increased capitation and guidelines for emergency procedures in crisis situations need to be addressed urgently.

It is the responsibility of the state to provide the resources necessary to ensure that the educational needs of children with ASD are met. Implementation of these recommendations will require sufficient resources in terms of funding services, personnel and training. Without such resources and supports the State's commitment to the education of children with ASD is questioned. The INTO is willing to contribute to the next stage of discussions on this policy advice.