

Special Needs Assistant (SNA) Scheme

Information for Parents/
Guardians of Children and
Young People with Special
Educational Needs

The aim of this pamphlet is to inform parents
and guardians about the SNA scheme in schools



ncse 

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council for Special Education

The term 'special educational needs' includes a broad spectrum of children with different abilities and educational difficulties who may require extra teaching support and/or extra support with care needs.

The majority of children with special educational needs thrive in school with the support of their teachers and without the need for additional care support, over and above that which is provided by the child's class or subject teacher. However, some children do need additional care support to make their attendance at school possible.

The SNA scheme was put in place to provide for the minority of students who have significant need for care support and who would not be able to attend school without such additional support.

What is a Special Needs Assistant (SNA)?

Special needs assistants (SNAs) play an important role in assisting the teacher to support students with special educational needs who have significant care needs. They are allocated to the school and work under the direction of the principal/teachers. The SNA usually supports a number of students with care needs in the school. Most students with special educational needs do not have significant care needs and therefore will not need access to a special needs assistant while at school.

Which students can access SNA support?

Students who may be approved access to SNA support are those:

- who have significant care needs arising from a disability or medical condition;
- and**
- whose professional reports indicate that the student's care needs are so significant that they will need adult assistance in order to be able to attend school and to take part in education.

These are students who require more care support than can be given by the class/subject teacher or by other staff or students in the school or by using assistive technology or by adapting the school building.

The Department of Education and Skills has set out the minimum class group: SNA ratios for special schools and special classes but additional SNAs may be allocated in line with the care needs of the students, where necessary.

What is a significant care need?

Many students can have some level of care need in school which is met by the class/subject teacher. However some students with special educational needs have care needs which are so significant that they require assistance with, for example:

- Eating – because of difficulties with swallowing or mobility
- Taking necessary medicine – because the amount of assistance he/she requires would disrupt normal teaching time
- Toileting and general hygiene
- Mobility and orientation
- Managing frequent and prolonged epileptic seizures or fragile health

Or where assistance is required to:

- Move and lift a student
- Operate hoists and other equipment
- Withdraw a student temporarily from a classroom when this is essential for safety, personal care, medical reasons or where the student is frequently distressed arising from their special educational needs.

A student who has significant care needs arising from severe communication difficulties might also require access to SNA support.

Does the SNA teach my child?

SNAs are not qualified teachers and are not allocated to teach students or provide educational support.

All students, including those with special educational needs, are taught directly by the class/subject teacher who is qualified and responsible for the education and care of all the students in the class. Every recognised school has additional teachers available to provide extra tuition and support for students who require assistance with their learning.

Will my child receive support as soon as he/she starts school?

Whether your child receives support as soon as he/she starts school depends on the level of his/her care needs. Some children have very considerable care needs and can be expected to need care support as soon as they start school, for example children who:

- are incontinent and have not yet learned to self-catheterise
- have very significant medical needs, for example PEG feeding or ongoing serious respiratory difficulties
- are blind/visually impaired and likely to need access to SNA support until they are confident about finding their way around the school and/or managing their assistive technology
- are Deaf/hard of hearing and communicate primarily through Irish Sign Language
- have serious mobility difficulties arising from a physical disability.

In these and similar cases, the NCSE will allocate SNA support, where necessary, so that the child can be given access to SNA support as soon as he/she comes to school.

In other cases, it can be better to wait until the child begins school before deciding whether or not he/she will need access to SNA support. This is particularly the case where the recommendation for SNA support is due to a child's behavioural difficulties. In these cases, it can be in children's interest to allow them some time to settle down in school before the school decides to apply for SNA support. It is then possible to see what abilities the child brings to school, what are his/her care needs in the classroom situation, and whether his/her care needs can be met with the support of the teacher. SNA support can be provided if after some time, it becomes clear that the child's behavioural needs cannot be met without access to such support.

Will my child receive care support all through school?

That depends on whether or not your child continues to need care support throughout his/her school life. Everybody wants as many students as possible to be in a position to leave school without needing adult support. As students' care needs diminish and they become more independent, a key goal in providing SNA support in the first place has been achieved.

The special educational needs organiser (SENO) reviews SNA allocations annually because students' needs change over time as they grow and develop. The views of parents, teachers and students (where possible) are included in the annual review. It is in your child's interest that his/her care needs are regularly reviewed to ensure that the appropriate level of support continues to be in place. Some students may require the same level of SNA support following review, some may require less if their care needs have diminished and some may require more if their care needs have increased.

From the school year 2015-2016, schools will be required to have a personal plan for your child that outlines his/her care needs and shows how the SNA will assist him/her to reach care goals set out in the plan.

Each student's plan should target enabling independent skills and fading out SNA support as early and appropriately as possible so that most students can make the transition to post-primary school without the need for care supports.

Many post-primary students have made it clear that they do not want to have an adult accompanying them because this can get in the way of making friends and becoming more independent. Also, students must be prepared for life after school and the majority of adults will not have, or require, an SNA or personal assistant when they leave school. In most cases therefore, access to SNA support is not desirable or age-appropriate for post-primary students unless it is essential to meet chronic and serious care needs.

On the other hand there are some post-primary students who do require SNA support to meet particular care needs at a certain point or whose care needs only become clear as the young person gets older or whose emerging conditions develop at this stage. SNA support is sanctioned in these cases, as necessary and at the appropriate level.

A small number of students with very significant care needs will require full time care support throughout their school-life and throughout the school day. These are students who have serious medical or sensory needs or very significant care needs arising from their disability. The NCSE will allocate the appropriate level of SNA support to the school for these students.

However, many other students will require care support for only a short period of time in school or for part of their school day, until they become more independent.

Why can there be confusion about the role of the SNA?

Sometimes health professionals recommend SNA support because they think that SNAs are allocated to provide educational support and/or carry out therapy programmes for the student in school. This is not the case but it can cause confusion when the SENO does not approve applications on this basis as many parents and schools think that once a health professional recommends SNA support, it is automatically given. Professionals should only recommend SNA support for students who have significant care needs. Every school has additional teachers available to provide extra tuition and support for students who require assistance with their learning.

How do I apply for my child to have access to SNA support?

You don't have to apply for your child to have access to SNA support – the school will make the application for your child, with your permission.

Professional reports and assessments play an important role in the process of allocating SNA support. The SENO decides the level of SNA support to be allocated to the school, in accordance with DES policy and taking into account:

- Professional reports outlining the nature and extent of your child's care needs.
- Documentation that describes your child's special care need, the reasons why the support of an SNA is necessary and the benefits that your child would gain from such care support in a school setting.
- Your child's care needs in the school context.

The school's overall need for additional SNA support is also considered as there may already be SNA support in the school that your child can access.

Does my child's access to SNA support transfer from primary to post-primary school?

The additional supports that your child receives in primary school do not automatically transfer to post-primary school. This is because students' needs change over time and they may require a greater or lesser amount of support to manage in a post-primary school. It is also because the primary school is the employer of the SNA and employees do not automatically transfer from one employer to another.

Your child will be provided with access to SNA support in post-primary schools if s/he continues to need it. When your child is transferring from primary to post-primary, the post-primary school must apply for resources to the NCSE and attach the relevant professional reports.

In the case of SNA support for a child's care needs, you may have the relevant professional reports already, but you may need to have them updated as your child's care needs may have changed.

Making an Appeal

If you, as a parent, feel that your child is not receiving sufficient care support in school, you should raise this concern, in the first place, with the school principal or the school's board of management.

The NCSE has developed an appeals process for schools or parents to appeal decisions made by SENOs to allocate SNAs to school. Full details of the NCSE appeal process are available at www.ncse.ie.

Further Information

Further information for parents/guardians can be found in the DES circular on the SNA scheme: **DES Circular 0030/2014: Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme** to support teachers in meeting the care needs of some children with special educational needs arising from a disability available on the DES website at: www.education.ie, and in the following NCSE publications:

- Children with Special Educational Needs: Information Booklet for Parents
- Choosing a School: A Guide for Parents and Guardians of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs
- NCSE Information Pamphlet Series for Parents of Children with Special Education Needs.

The NCSE publications are available at: www.ncse.ie/information-booklets-pamphlets-2.

The NCSE publishes details of all SNA allocations made to schools each year on their website at: www.ncse.ie.

Useful Contacts

- Your local SENO may be contacted through the school or from the NCSE website at www.ncse.ie.
- Department of Education and Skills: www.education.ie.

The following websites and support organisations may also be of assistance to you:

- Inclusion Ireland: www.inclusionireland.ie.
- National Parents Council Primary: www.npc.ie.
- National Parents Council Post-Primary: www.npcpp.ie.
- Psychological Society of Ireland: www.psihq.ie.
- Special Needs Parents Association: www.specialneedsparents.ie.

Please note that this list is not exhaustive and these organisations are listed only for information purposes. The National Council for Special Education may have had no involvement with these organisations and cannot vouch for them or their staff. Parents should always satisfy themselves regarding the appropriateness of providing any information concerning their child to any third-party.