



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

Review of SNA Scheme

Submission on behalf of the INTO

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The INTO welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme*. The introduction of Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) in schools to enhance the provision of education of pupils with Special Education Needs (SEN) has, in general, proven to be a great support in the development of inclusive education for these pupils. The INTO believes that SNAs are a vital support in the provision of a truly inclusive education. The SNA scheme allows for the participation of children with SEN in mainstream settings and supports their progression within the educational system. SNAs play a crucial role in meeting the care needs of children with special educational needs in order to allow them to be ready to access the curriculum and meet their learning goals. Whilst the professional credentials of support posts, similar to SNA posts, have evolved in other jurisdictions, the position of the SNA in Ireland has remained largely unchanged, with a job specification that continues to emphasise its caring, non-teaching nature (Keating and O' Connor, 2012).

The INTO recognises that the number of SNAs has been steadily increasing in recent years to 7,709 in primary schools in 2016 (DES, 2016). However, the *Growing Up in Ireland* data indicates that a prevalence rate of SEN has also increased to 25%, bringing Ireland more in line with prevalence estimates internationally (Banks and Mc Coy, 2011). Therefore, Ireland's needs in relation to special education are consistent with other countries.

The INTO does not recommend that SNAs should have a para-educator function. The research unequivocally indicates that the quality of teachers is the most influential factor in determining learning outcomes for all students including students with SEN (Darling-Hammond, L., 2000). The INTO believes that the educational role and remit falls within the professional ambit of the teacher in the class and the various special education teachers employed in schools. However, the INTO recognises that the policy in relation to the SNA role, as laid out by the DES Circular 0030/2014, does not always reflect the reality of how the role functions in some schools. In addition, *The Value for Money Review and Policy Review of the SNA Scheme (2011)* found that the role has expanded, in some instances, to include an administrative, therapeutic, teaching and behavioural function. The INTO believes that this disconnect is a reflection of the fact that schools are under-resourced in their efforts to provide an inclusive education for children with SEN. Therefore, the INTO proposes that SNAs in some instances could assist children in accessing the curriculum under the pedagogical guidance and expertise of the classroom teacher. In some instances, SNAs should be in a position to reinforce the work of the teacher with the child with SEN.

Consequently, the INTO proposes that the current narrow definition of the role should be broadened to allow the SNA to better support the best interests of the child in all aspects of their holistic development. The reality in classrooms is that SNAs assist teachers in the classroom to ensure the inclusion of children with SEN and to assist such pupils in accessing the curriculum which includes care needs, but may also include assisting pupils to remain on task. The INTO proposes that consideration should be given to the function of SNAs, as laid out in Circular 030/2014, to better reflect the reality and the actual needs of children with SEN. Care needs are not always the main barrier to inclusion and more flexibility within

the SNA role would benefit children with SEN. However, the INTO recognises that assisting pupils with curriculum work should not overshadow the primary care functions of the SNA. The stipulation of a 'care only' role is in marked contrast to the situation in many other countries, where assistants are adopting a role which is increasingly educational in focus (Moran and Abbott,2002). Lawlor (2002) also found that a role in support of learning was preferred by principals, SNAs and teachers in the Irish context. However, any broadening of the remit of the SNA should only be considered on the basis of a higher entry requirement and more systematic training and professional development.

The training and level of qualification held by SNAs vary considerably. Concern has been expressed at the paucity of qualifications and training in SEN for SNAs (INTO, 2003). Though the issue may have improved somewhat since then, the minimum requirements for SNAs have not changed. Students present with a range of disabilities and the complexity of special education needs continues to grow at an ever-increasing pace. In order to ensure the best provision of support for these students, the INTO believes that a standardised training qualification of FETEC Level 5 or 6 should be mandatory for SNAs. Currently, the DES Circular 0021/2011 requires SNAs to have a minimum of three Ds in their Junior Certificate or FETAC Level 3 qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications. The INTO is of the view that the current qualification requirement is not adequate for the complex demands associated with the role.

It is important that the SNA is recognised as a key member of the class team in an effort to provide continuity of approaches, both in dealing with behaviour and assisting with access to curricular work under the direction of the teacher. Consequently, SNAs require professional development opportunities to develop these skills. The provision of professional development and opportunities to upskill and develop their knowledge should be made available to SNAs. Currently, there are limited opportunities for professional development available to SNAs. While there is some level of professional development available to teachers from the SESS (Special Education Support Service), there is insufficient training or professional development available to teachers on managing, leading and developing working relationships with SNAs who work under the guidance of the class teacher.

Consideration must also be given to the development of the various working relationships in order to ensure that the SNA scheme develops and progresses to provide an effective support for pupils with SEN in primary schools. Therefore, a need has also been identified for collaborative team training for SNAs, mainstream class teachers and special educational teachers to better understand their respective roles and to develop strategies to work effectively together in order to collectively meet the needs of children with SEN. Conflict can often arise when roles are not understood, recognised or respected. Therefore, it is essential that the respective roles of the SNA, the class teacher and the special education teachers are clarified. Furthermore, the boundaries to each role need to be set out before appointment in order to prevent misinterpretation at a later stage. Parents also need to understand the distinction between the roles of the teacher and the SNA. Similarly, every effort must be made to ensure the general public are aware of the different roles to avoid misinformation being communicated to parents. Consideration should be given to the provision of guidance for parents in understanding the various roles in special education and in establishing mutually beneficial relationships.

In addition, there are increasing reports of assaults on teachers and SNAs in schools generally involving children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD). Such assaults have grave consequences for teachers and SNAs regarding their physical and mental wellbeing. Furthermore, assaults on employees have serious implications for school management and leadership. The *Report on the Role of the Special Needs Assistant (2016)* indicated that 38% of SNAs had been injured as a result of their work as a SNA. In the absence of clear guidelines and standard protocols schools are responding in an ad-hoc manner. SNAs and teachers require system-wide training in management of actual and potential aggression in order to minimise such incidents and alleviate the likelihood of assault.

Similarly, teachers and principals are expressing concern with the practice of SNAs administering medicine and performing complex medical or therapeutic procedures, in many cases, without the appropriate training. The administration of medications and carrying out of certain medical or therapeutic procedures is a liability issue for boards of management if the proper training is not provided. In order to ensure the health and safety of students and appropriate work practices for the SNA, the INTO is of the view that general knowledge regarding administration of medications and other common medical-related duties which may arise in the job should be included in SNA training and professional development. In the absence of school nurses, it is often the parent of the child with SEN that is left with the responsibility of communicating with the SNA regarding medical duties which is not always appropriate and would be better provided by a qualified health professional.

In conclusion, the INTO would like to reiterate the valuable role SNAs play in supporting children with SEN to access education in mainstream and special educational settings. The SNA Scheme is integral in the provision of an inclusive education system for all students. However, any review of the SNA Scheme must take account and consider the limitations of the narrow description of the SNA role. Due consideration should also be given to a standardised minimum qualification for SNAs that reflects the increasingly complex nature of the actual role. Similarly, SNAs should be provided with structured and comprehensive training and professional development opportunities to ensure they remain upskilled and competent in current best practice. In particular, schools, teachers and SNAs need guidelines and advice in relation to workplace assaults and procedures for administering medical and therapeutic practices. The INTO proposes that consideration should be given to the concept of a General Allocation Model for the provision of SNA supports in schools. Furthermore, the INTO has previously recommended the appointment of classroom assistants in the infant classes to support children in their early years learning. The INTO believes that classroom assistants would also help support young children with SEN.

References

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