



INTO Submission to NCSE

Special Schools and Special Classes

February 2019

Introduction

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation welcomes the invitation to make a submission to the NCSE on the *Special Schools and Classes* in our education system.

Special schools and classes have a long history in educational provision in Ireland. The State's policy of inclusion has seen more children with special educational needs attend mainstream schools and special classes in mainstream schools. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of special classes for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in particular, becoming 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 and pupils.

The maintenance of a continuum of provision to include special schools and 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 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 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 specific needs for pupils and teachers. The INTO would also to draw attention to Hospital Schools, as they are neither special schools nor mainstream schools, but have specific needs relating to the education of children who are ill in hospital.

The INTO recommends that:

- a continuum of provision ranging from special schools, to special classes and inclusion in mainstream classes with support be available as an integral part of the Irish educational system;
- policy be developed to address the specific needs of hospital schools.

Special Schools

Special schools play a central role on special education provision in Ireland. The profile of many special schools has changed significantly since their establishment. Special schools enroll pupils with a range of complex educational and care needs. Pupils in special schools often require multi-disciplinary support and nursing support in addition to SNA support. Special schools enroll pupils from four years of age to eighteen years of age. School transport is arranged for many pupils attending special schools. Special schools are complex environments and additional supports are required.

Principal teachers in special schools have significant leadership and management responsibilities as their teaching staff is a small proportion of the overall staff for which they have responsibility. In addition, principal teachers in special schools spend a significant amount of their time liaising with multi-disciplinary services and other agencies in relation to supports for the pupils in their schools. The INTO is of the view that all special schools should have administrative principals and that larger special schools should also have administrative deputy principals. The allocation of 23 administrative deputy principal teaching positions in Budget 2019 is a welcome development in this regard but this must be further extended. Remuneration for principal teachers should also reflect the size of the whole staff, not only teaching staff.

Most special schools need access to nursing supports. Nurses should be part of the clinical teams that are assigned to special schools. It should not be the role of the board of management to recruit or provide clinical governance to nursing staff in schools.

Given the complexity of needs in special schools it is timely to review the teacher pupil ratios and the ratios of SNAs per class. The recommendations of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC 1993) underpin current policies in relation to ratios of teachers and SNAs. However, these recommendations need to be updated to reflect the current situation in special education. It is appropriate for a ratio of 4 pupils to 1 teacher to apply for children with complex special needs, and this ratio should be further extended as needed.

The majority of pupils attending special schools are of post-primary school age. Special schools are designated as primary schools, though staff may include both primary and post-primary qualified teachers. Pupils of post-primary school age do not have the same school-year as their peers in mainstream schools. As special schools are designated Primary, they do not have access to post-primary curriculum choices and subject teachers. Although they are primary, special schools are obliged to offer post-primary certification programmes, such as junior cycle L1LP / L2LP programmes.

Many special schools now offer the new curriculum programmes at Levels 1, 2 and 3 at junior cycle level. Curriculum will also be further developed for senior cycle pupils with special educational needs. The staffing allocation for special schools should reflect the curricular needs of the pupils, and is most likely to include both primary and post-primary qualified teachers.

The INTO recommends that:

- all special schools should have an administrative principal;
- all special schools with 8 or more class teachers should have an administrative deputy principal;

- remuneration of principal and deputy principal teachers in special schools should reflect the size of the whole staff;
- multi-disciplinary and nursing staff should be available to all special schools as required;
- the NCSE should consult with teachers, parents, pupils and school management in relation to the designation of special schools;
- professional development should be available to all teachers in special schools in relation to curricular developments at both primary and post-primary level;
- the NCSE Regional Support Service should continue to support special schools.

Placement

Children with special educational needs should be enrolled in schools that best meet their educational needs, whether special school, special class or mainstream class with support. Children should be enrolled in special schools or classes based on the recommendations of relevant professionals, e.g. psychologists, speech and language therapists, special education teachers. A formal diagnosis of particular disabilities should no longer be necessary in all cases, as there may be some rare conditions that have not yet been named. However, some special schools have a specific designation, e.g. Severe / Profound General Learning Disabilities, and such schools must always ensure that they have sufficient places for distinct group of pupils. In such cases categories of disability remain relevant. Decisions regarding children's educational placements should be determined by professional recommendations, failure to progress in particular settings, and an ability to benefit either socially or academically, and accessibility of placement. All relevant stakeholders along with the parents should have a role in determining the best placement for children with special educational needs. The final decision should rest with parents as long as the child's safety is not compromised. Parents should be supported in making a decision regarding the best placement for their child.

The INTO recommends that:

- professional and school-based assessments and the views of relevant professionals should inform decisions regarding pupils' placement in special schools, special classes or mainstream schools with support for children with special educational needs;
- the ability to benefit from educational placements should be a factor in determining the educational placement of children with special educational needs;
- a specific diagnosis of a particular disability should no longer be required in all cases to determine the educational placement of children with special educational needs;
- all relevant stakeholders should be involved in decisions regarding children's educational placement.

Special Classes

The INTO advocates better planning across the system for the establishment of special classes, including special classes for children with ASD 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 in the 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. The INTO acknowledges that there is currently a shortage of places in special classes for children with ASD at both primary and post-primary level. Where classes are being established in school, it is more convenient for schools if all special classes for ASD are established at the time. Doing so reduces the amount of time that principal teachers spend on administration associated with the establishment of special classes.

A tension exists at present for schools regarding the protocol for admitting pupils to 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.

The INTO recommends that:

- where it is intended to establish more than one special class in a school, that all classes be established at the same time, in order to reduce the amount of time spent on administration;
- placement of pupils in special classes should be reviewed periodically to ensure that the placement remains the most appropriate one for each child.

Special Classes for Children with Emotional and Behaviour Disorders (EBD)

Special classes for students with EBD are a crucial component of the continuum of support as these classes often offer an effective option for students with complex emotional and behavioural needs. The feedback from schools is that students, who may otherwise be home tutored, expelled or on rolling suspensions, thrive in these settings and have opportunities for reintegration into mainstream settings on a phased and full-

time basis. These classes greatly assist schools in more effectively meeting the educational needs of students placed in these classes.

While special classes for students with EBD have a maximum pupil-teacher ratio of 8:1 (the ratio is 6:1 for severe EBD), the ratio of SNA to class group is wholly inadequate at one SNA per 4 classes. Consideration must be given to reviewing this ratio in order to ensure that there are two adults, at a minimum, assigned to these classes to reflect the profile of care needs and to safeguard the health and safety of pupils and staff.

The process of opening and sustaining a special class for students with EBD is presenting some challenges. Notwithstanding parental wishes, students with EBD are only considered for a special class based on recommendations in a professional report which set out that the student is in receipt of continual intervention from therapeutic services. In this regard, it is difficult to fulfil this requirement as it depends on the efficiency and effectiveness of external therapeutic services in an area, for example, CAMHS. Therefore, the INTO proposes that the criteria should be less restrictive. Similarly, teachers and principals report that clinical therapists can be reluctant to make a recommendation on a report for a student. It is also noteworthy that the requirement to have a professional report no longer aligns with other special education policy developments, for example, the new model for the allocation of special educational teachers.

The INTO recommends that:

- two SNAs be allocated to each special class for children with emotional and behavioural disorders
- CAMHS be fully staffed to meet the needs of all children and adolescents with emotional and behavioural disorders

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 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 sufficiently 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 special schools and schools with ASD and Special Classes. The role of secretaries in special schools and 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.

The INTO recommends that

- an additional 20 days of release time per annum be available to teaching principals in schools with special classes
- administrative principals be appointed in all schools with three or more special classes
- administrative deputy principals be appointed in all mainstream primary schools with more than 20 teachers where there are special classes
- an administrative principal should be appointed in all special schools
- full time school secretaries be appointed in all special schools and in schools with two or more special classes

Transitions

During their school lives children will face a number of transitions, as they move from pre-school to primary, from primary to post-primary, from special school or class to mainstream or from mainstream to special class or school. For all stages of transition protocols should be agreed around the transfer of information and the continuity of support and resources in order to ensure successful transitions. Collaborative multidisciplinary assessment should be readily available in a pre-school setting to increase early intervention. It is regrettable that the increase in the number of special classes at primary level is not matched by a corresponding increase in special class provision at second level. This lack of provision creates significant difficulties for pupils transferring from primary to post-primary, particularly for those pupils who require a continuity of experience and support. Some pupils who manage at primary level may experience considerable difficulty at post-primary level and may need access to more support, or special class at that point. Consideration should be given to expanding the provision of alternative options such as the Alternative Learning Programme.¹

Special Schools see a huge increase in the number of pupils seeking enrolment at the end of their Primary School age (12/13). Schools are often full which means many pupils, especially

¹ <http://www.ddletb.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Alternative-Learning-Programme-Booklet.pdf>

those with more complex needs (and behavioural issues) are often left with little or no chance of a place in a special school.

The INTO recommends that:

- the development of transition protocols around the transfer of information regarding special educational needs between pre-schools, primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools.
- the continuity of resources for all children with SEN as they progress through the system. HSE and DES should be identifying the budget for resources that can be predicted/ estimated for the duration of the child's school life and transition to adult services
- the provision of guidelines for schools around transitioning between special classes and mainstream classes.

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 and learning 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 special and inclusive education, including 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 and teachers in special schools 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). It is difficult at present for teachers to access courses and professional development available through SESS or the Diploma courses in special education in the Colleges of Education / Universities. 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 and special schools 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. A mentoring system should also be considered so that newly appointed special class teachers can benefit from the

expertise of those who are experienced in the role. A period of release time to observe in advance of setting up a special class would be very beneficial

The INTO recommends that:

- all teachers have access to ongoing professional development and learning throughout their careers regarding special and inclusive education;
- prior to taking up a teaching position in a special school or class, teachers are provided with an opportunity for relevant professional development and learning;
- substitute cover be provided to enable teachers to avail of professional development opportunities and to visit other special schools or classes;
- a mentoring programme for teachers newly assigned to special classes should be considered to enable such teachers to learn from the experience of others;
- all teachers should have access to the Diploma courses in special education organised in the Colleges of Education

The *Regional Support Service*, currently being established by the NCSE, has great potential to offer initial and ongoing support to schools regarding the education of children of children with SEN, including ASD. 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.

The INTO recommends that:

- teachers with qualifications and expertise in special education be appointed to the NCSE Regional Support Service to offer support, advice and professional development for teachers in schools;
- professionals with qualifications and expertise in therapies such as speech and language, behaviour and occupational therapy be appointed to the regional support teams;
- professionals with expertise in behaviour management should form part of the team in the NCSE Regional Support Service.

SNAs

The INTO notes the publication of the report on the review of the SNA scheme. It is the view of the INTO that there should be no diminution in the support available from SNAs to support pupils whether in special schools or in mainstream schools. Professional development and training should also be available to SNAs in relation to supporting all pupils with special educational needs regardless of setting. Funding should be granted to schools for this purpose. Consideration should also be given to extending the remit of the former SESS, now part of NCSE Regional Support Service, 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 be available for all pupils with special educational needs regardless of setting.

Such support should also be available to enable pupils with SEN in special classes to integrate and transition smoothly into mainstream settings on a gradual basis.

The INTO recommends that:

- adequate SNA provision be available so that pupils in special classes can benefit from opportunities to be included in mainstream classes and to support transition processes;
- the remit of the NCSE Regional support Service should be extended to include professional development for SNAs;
- the ratios for SNAs in special classes and schools should be reviewed to reflect the increasing complexity of enrolments.

Multidisciplinary Supports

Pupils who access special schools and 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 and occupational 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).

HSE and DES need to consult regarding the roll out of the Progressing Disability School Age Team supports to schools. If based on a child's geographical address, there could be clinicians from a number of SATs visiting the one school.

The provision of special classes for Speech and Language Disorders should continue as they provide intensive early intervention for pupils that require such support.

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 for all children with SEN regardless of setting. 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.

The INTO recommends that:

- therapy and nursing supports should be available to all pupils who require such support regardless of placement;
- therapy support should be available in schools, with appropriate governance structures in place;
- the NCSE Regional Support Service should facilitate the provision of play, art and music therapy where such therapies are of benefit to pupils;
- special classes for pupils with Speech and Language Disorder should continue as part of the system.

Challenging Behaviour and Crisis Situations

There is an increasing number of pupils with challenging behaviour presenting in schools today. For many of these pupils their needs are not being met at present. Schools do not have sufficient supports to provide counselling or behaviour and emotional support for pupils who require such support. For their own safety, and for the safety of other pupils and staff, some pupils require individual teaching, or gradual inclusion with their peers, pending the addressing of their behaviour and emotional issues.

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 incidences that threaten the health and safety of staff and other pupils in mainstream classes and in special schools and 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, nurture rooms and quiet rooms should become an integral feature of school design for all new schools. Grants should be available to existing schools to add additional accommodation to meet sensory and nurturing needs. DES have a responsibility to fund a Vaccination programme for staff who are at risk in Special classes and schools, particularly where there is violent behaviour (e.g biting).

The INTO recommends that:

- the DES should issue guidelines immediately to support schools in relation to handling assaults that require physical intervention;
- the DES should provide professional development and training to teachers, SNAs and other staff in relation to prevention of assaults and physical interventions when required.
- the DES should fund vaccination programmes for all staff in special schools and classes, and in mainstream classes if required.

Concluding Comments

Teachers are to the fore in making inclusion a reality in mainstream, ASD and Special Classes and in special schools. 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 for all pupils teachers 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 regarding the provision of special education and inclusion. The INTO will further explore these views and issues at its biennial Special Education Conference in March 2019.

The INTO strongly believes that special schools and special classes can, and must, continue to provide an essential part of the continuum of provision for children with special educational needs.

References

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

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