



Irish National Teachers' Organisation
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

NCSE Progress Report on the Future of Special Schools and Classes

Submission on behalf of the INTO

11 March 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The INTO supports an education system that is inclusive of all children. The INTO is of the view that a continuum of provision, to include special schools, special classes and support in mainstream schools, is required to meet a continuum of need in an inclusive education system. Significant additional investment is required to ensure an inclusive education system for all children. An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through the provision of resources, therapeutic services and professional development to meet specific needs creates significant challenges for both pupils and teachers. In order to enhance current support for children with SEN the INTO makes a number of recommendations, including the following:

- An inclusive approach to education should be underpinned by universal design for learning
- Class sizes be reduced significantly to reflect the diversity of modern day classrooms
- Multi-disciplinary and nursing staff should be available to all special schools as required;
- All teachers have access to ongoing professional development and learning throughout their careers regarding special and inclusive education;
- Additional supports be provided to all schools to address the mental health needs of pupils;
- Guidelines should be issued immediately to support schools in relation to handling situations that require physical intervention

It must be acknowledged, however, that even with full resourcing there will still be a minority of pupils for whom a Special School or Special Class setting will be the appropriate placement. It is important that the individual needs of each pupil be the over-riding consideration in deciding on what the appropriate placement is for that pupil.

INCLUSION IN IRISH PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Introduction

*An inclusive education system is one that accommodates all students whatever their abilities or requirements, and at all levels – pre-school, primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and life-long learning.*¹

The Irish National Teachers' Organisation has always supported inclusion within our primary education system and believes that all schools within the continuum of provision in our current educational system (comprising mainstream schools, special schools and schools with special classes) are inclusive schools. Primary teachers have been to the fore in welcoming children with special educational needs in our primary schools, both in mainstream and in special schools.

Current State policy aims to ensure that more children with special educational needs attend both mainstream schools and special classes in mainstream schools. At present, approximately 1% of our pupil population attends special schools. Recent years have seen a significant increase in the number of special classes for children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) in particular, and such classes are considered an integral and essential part of the Irish education system. Although most children with disabilities are enrolled in mainstream schools, this is not a barometer to measure the level of inclusion, but rather the determinant central to their development and the goal of education is whether they are receiving the supports that their needs demand. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. Many children do not receive the back-up services required to support them and enable them to benefit from their placement, particularly in mainstream, and to reach their potential.

UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

The INTO is aware that Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018. Section 24 of Convention refers to education. The Convention obliges States that signed the Convention to ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:

- a. The full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
- b. The development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
- c. Enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.²

The convention states that persons with disabilities should not “be excluded from the general education system” and that persons with disabilities should have “access to inclusive, quality and free primary and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live”, that “reasonable accommodation of the individual’s requirements” should be provided, they should “receive the supports required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education” and that “effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion” (UNCRPD Section 24).

¹ https://www.unicef.org/eca/sites/unicef.org.eca/files/IE_summary_accessible_220917_0.pdf

² UNCRPD Article 24 (1)

The INTO notes the progress report published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), in November 2019, regarding Policy Advice on Special Schools and Special Classes, and the suggestion that Ireland may need to re-consider how children with special educational needs are educated within a continuum of provision in order to move towards a “total inclusion” approach.

The INTO supports inclusion and strives to ensure that all children – regardless of their needs – are included in our education system. Primary schools have routinely (almost always in the absence of adequate resources and sufficient access to services), provided an inclusive education for thousands of pupils with special needs. It is the view of the INTO that a continuum of provision to include special schools, special classes and mainstream schools, to meet a continuum of need, is in line with providing an inclusive education system, as outlined in Section 24 of the UNCRPD. Our current system, however, is not without challenges in meeting the goal of an inclusive education for all children.

Key elements of an Inclusive system



Placement

The INTO is committed to providing children with special educational needs the best opportunity in an environment that is conducive to their educational development and progress, whether in a special school, special class or mainstream class with additional support. Whilst a final decision regarding placement of a child rests with his/her parents (as long as the child's safety and that of other children is not compromised), they should receive the necessary supports in arriving at their decision. All stakeholders along with parents should have an input in the decision-making process, providing comprehensive advice that allows parents make a well-informed judgement when determining the best placement for children with special educational needs. As such, recommendations of relevant professionals, e.g. psychologists, speech and language therapists, special education teachers will be important. It is imperative that the rights of all children to fair and equitable education should be duly considered, with regard to resources and supports, and responsibility for provision of these resources and supports should lie with the State.

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 or special setting or for whom the back-up support services are not being provided by the State. An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through the provision of resources, therapeutic services and professional development to meet specific needs creates significant challenges for both pupils and teachers. The INTO also draw attention to Hospital Schools, as they are neither categorised as special schools nor mainstream schools, but have specific needs relating to the education of children who are ill in hospital.

Placing students with disabilities within mainstream class settings may appear inclusive at surface level, however, without the necessary adaptations or supports it cannot be called inclusion and may have the opposite effect. Not providing the necessary supports and resources, neglects our commitment to provide education to each child that promotes *"the development of (his/her) personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential"*. An inclusive education system provides education environments with modified design and physical structures, teaching methods, and curriculum as well as the culture, policy and practice to ensure accessibility to all students without discrimination. Effective models of inclusive education not only benefit students with disabilities, but also create an environment in which every student, including those who do not have disabilities, can flourish. The concept of inclusion is not about giving every pupil the same, it is about ensuring that each child has the opportunity to bloom and flourish in an environment where diversity is the norm and barriers for all pupils are removed. An inclusive approach to education should be underpinned by universal design for learning (UDL).

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.

Enrolment

The Minister for Education and Skills, Joe McHugh, in November 2019 stated that within a two-year period there was an intention to prohibit schools from asking parents who wished to enrol a pupil whether their child had special educational needs. This provision does not apply to applications for enrolment in special schools or classes. Such a radical policy change aroused concern among teachers and principals across Ireland who sought clarification. The INTO supports the provision in the School Admissions Act that children should not be denied enrolment to any school on the basis of having special educational needs. Schools may not be permitted to ask parents whether their child has special educational needs on application forms for enrolment, however, once a child has been enrolled, and before they start in the school, it is essential for the school to ask parents whether the child has any specific special educational need. The reason for acquiring such information is to allow schools prepare to meet the child's needs, in line with their rights as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. It would be negligent on the part of the school not to do so. Pre-schools should be encouraged to use '*Mo Scéal*', transfer forms developed by the NCCA, to enable the transfer of pertinent information regarding a child to the primary school where the child is enrolled. Primary teachers can also use children's report cards to transfer information from one primary school to another.

Within any one classroom, there could be any number of children with varying abilities and needs. Principals/teachers need to be aware, insofar as possible, of the needs of the pupils in their class well before their first day in school - in Junior Infants or in other classes. Where the necessary supports and resources are not available, the child's rights to fair and equitable education on the same basis as their peers without disabilities is denied and can result in huge negative effects on their mental health as they grow up in a system that fails to meet their educational needs. Every child in a mainstream classroom has needs, some occasional or intermittent while others are constant. Some needs are physical while others are social/emotional. No two pupils in any given class have identical needs, but if the necessary resources are available, all the children can achieve at their own level. Where the necessary supports and resources are not available to all children who need them in a mainstream classroom, all children lose out on their full rights to fair and equitable education, as the teacher struggles to fill gaps in support and resources.

Schools must be able to plan their support for children with disabilities and special educational needs. Today's classrooms are diverse, and children have a wide variety of needs. Without prior information, children may not have the supports they require – for example: children with high sensory needs who are non-verbal and cannot cope with the noise level of a mainstream classroom, children who are verbal with high medical needs, children with dyslexia, children with physical needs and children with care and toileting needs. In reality, some children cannot cope with bright lights, others cannot put up with noise, while others cannot communicate their needs and become very agitated and upset. In such circumstances, the mainstream setting is inappropriate. Schools require information on the special education needs of incoming pupils in order to ensure that they can plan accordingly. By not having the relevant details available to schools, in order to implement the necessary supports, it is ultimately the pupils who suffer. The DES and the NCSE must take responsibility for ensuring that all schools are sufficiently resourced and supported to provide an appropriate education for all its pupils.

Differentiation in class requires additional time to prepare extra resources. Teachers' workload is increasing as the widening levels within classes often necessitate a different curriculum plan for many children. As a result, all children have reduced access to direct teacher contact, putting student

achievement at risk. Class sizes need to be reduced to accommodate and respond to diversity within classrooms and to enable all pupils to reach their potential.

The INTO recommends:

- Class sizes be reduced significantly to reflect the diversity of modern day classrooms

Special Schools

Special schools play a pivotal role in special education provision in Ireland and the profile of many special schools has evolved since their establishment. Pupils who are enrolled in special schools (from four years of age to eighteen years of age) present with a range of complex educational and care needs and often require multi-disciplinary support, including nursing assistance, in addition to SNA support. As such, these settings are typically complex environments.

Although special schools are designated as primary schools, a proportion of pupils attending special schools are of post-primary school age and therefore the school staff may include both primary and post-primary qualified teachers. Pupils of post-primary school age attend special schools for the primary academic year while their peers in mainstream schools attend school for the post-primary academic year. As special schools are designated primary schools, they do not always have access to post-primary curriculum choices and subject teachers. Although they are primary schools, 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 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. The current ratio of 4 pupils to 1 teacher that applies for children with complex special needs, should be further extended as needed. 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 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.

Special Intervention Schools and Classes

There are currently four Reading Schools in Ireland that provide specialist intervention reading and language support for children that are not progressing in their reading despite additional support in their mainstream schools. The special reading schools provide intensive support for a period of two years. Children then return to their mainstream schools having developed sufficient competence in reading to continue with minimal support. Short-term intensive intervention enables struggling readers to continue in mainstream schools. Special Reading Schools, and special classes for children with specific learning disabilities, therefore, need to continue as part of the continuum of provision.

There are short term special intervention classes for students with specific learning disabilities and for children with speech and language disabilities. Children attend such classes for a period of two years where they can avail of intensive support and intervention. Speech and Language Therapists are assigned to work alongside the class teacher for periods of the week in the Special Classes for Children with speech and Language Difficulties.

The INTO recommends:

- given the success of special schools and classes that provide short-term interventions for children with specific needs, consideration needs to be given to their expansion to ensure equity of access to children regardless of geography, with co-location alongside mainstream schools an option.
- special classes for pupils with Speech and Language Disorder should continue as part of the continuum of provision.

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 to the educational setting that they need, irrespective of demographics or geographical location. While NCSE and NEPS should work collaboratively with schools around the establishment of special classes, offering all necessary 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 in a school. 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 schools, it is more practical for school communities if all special classes for ASD are established simultaneously. Doing so could reduce the amount of time that principal teachers spend on administration associated with the establishment of special classes. The opening of the classes could be staggered to ensure a smooth transition for pupils and teachers. In light of challenges that arose in recent cases whereby schools were instructed to open special classes, the INTO reiterates the need for thorough planning and assessing of school buildings to ensure that they are fit for purpose and can (or can be renovated to) provide the necessary space (breakout area, quiet room, sensory room etc.) for pupils' needs. Where there are concerns over the suitability of some of the school structures and their potential to meet an appropriate standard, the necessary building and renovations works must be done prior to the enrolment of the

pupils. In future, buildings should be designed in such a way as to allow for resources and space for pupils with special educational needs, but where buildings date back many decades and where special classes are to open, the same standards must be attained before the opening of the special classes. It is appropriate, in the interests of supported inclusion, that agreement should be reached between the INTO, management bodies and the DES regarding the standards of accommodation and facilities that should apply for special classes.

The INTO acknowledges that the Minister has the power to designate schools to establish a special class. Approaches to schools to enquire about their capacity to establish special classes should be conducted in a professional manner, and no undue pressure should be put on principal teachers. Should the Minister designate a school to establish a special class, all physical modifications must be completed before the class is opened and professional development and training for staff must be provided prior to the opening of any special classes.

The INTO recommends that:

- where it is intended to establish more than one special class in a school, all classes should be built and financed at the same time, in order to reduce the amount of time spent on administration;
- consideration should be given to devising a central procurement process to support the building of special classes in order to reduce the workload on the principal teacher;
- special classes, once built and equipped, could be opened on a staggered basis as agreed following consultation between the principal and the NCSE;
- placement of pupils in special classes should be reviewed periodically to ensure that the placement remains the most appropriate one for each child;
- all supports and resources should be provided to schools prior to the opening of new special classes;
- professional development and training must be provided to all staff deployed to special classes prior to the opening of new special classes and should continue throughout teachers' careers;
- all physical modifications, including the provision of new classrooms, nurture rooms, sensory rooms or therapy rooms must be completed prior to the opening of new special classes.

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

Special classes for students with Emotional and Behaviour Disorders are a crucial component of the continuum of support as these classes can offer an effective option for students with complex needs. Schools report that students, large numbers of whom face suspension, expulsion or shortened school days due to factors arising from their condition, thrive in these settings. In a mainstream context, these students find themselves in classrooms where they cannot fully access the curriculum, and where they can have a negative impact on the education of their peers, mainly due to a lack of resources, a lack of training for teachers, and a lack of time to focus on their individual needs. In a special class setting, tailored for their particular needs, they prosper and can be afforded opportunities for re-inclusion into mainstream settings on a phased or full-time basis. These special classes greatly assist schools to meet more effectively 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 SNAs 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 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
- additional supports be provided to all schools to address the mental health needs of pupils.

The Role of the Principal Teacher in Special Schools and Schools with Special Classes

Principal teachers in special schools have significant leadership and management responsibilities as the cohort of teachers on their staff can often be a small proportion of the overall team for which they have responsibility. In addition, principal teachers in special schools spend a significant amount of time liaising with multi-disciplinary services and other agencies in relation to supports for the pupils in their schools. Recognising this additional, substantial workload, 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. Remuneration for principal teachers should reflect the size of the whole staff, not only teaching staff.

Most special schools need access to nursing assistance. Nurses should be part of the clinical teams that are assigned to special schools. Recruitment of nursing staff or provision of clinical governance should not be the responsibility of the school's board of management.

Principals are also heavily involved in the process of securing transport and support for pupils with special educational needs. The school principal must supply information (in addition to professional reports) to prove that a child's care and safety needs are such as to require the support of an escort. Based on information provided, the Department of Education allocates funding to schools for the employment of escorts to accompany these children.

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 other special classes.

In addition, the INTO recommends that full time qualified school secretaries should be available to all schools, including special schools. The role of secretaries in special schools and in schools with ASD and other special classes has become more complex with increasing demands for data gathering and liaising with relevant ancillary services. Such tasks often fall to the principal teacher in the absence of sufficient administrative support, thereby increasing their workload.

The INTO recommends that:

- administrative principals be appointed in all schools with special classes;
- in mainstream schools with special classes administrative deputy principals be appointed in schools with more than 17 authorised teaching posts;
- full time school secretaries be appointed in all schools, including special schools.

Transitions

A number of transitions occur through the primary school education years. Some occur across the years while others occur during the child's day or week. Such periods of accelerated developmental demands can prove difficult for pupils and parents alike. Although some children will adapt easily to a different educational environment, for others moving from the familiar to a new setting can be a daunting task (Brostrom, 2000). The challenge of transition can be compounded when a child has special educational needs. The need for flexibility in accommodating this transition, especially when the student has a special need, is noted in the Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum and will be an important facet of the reviewed curriculum. Collaborative multidisciplinary assessment should be readily available in a pre-school setting to increase early intervention. Pupils with special education needs, if placed in a mainstream primary school classroom, may find themselves overwhelmed by the sensory environment. Minor changes to a daily schedule or plan, or a lack of clarity, can be catalysts for distress.

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 change. 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 to a special class at that point.

Special Schools see a huge increase in the number of pupils seeking enrolment at the end of their mainstream primary schooling when aged about 12/13. Schools are often full which means many pupils, especially those with more complex needs (and behavioural issues) can be left with little or no chance of a place in a special school.

The INTO recommends:

- 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.

Teacher Education and Continuous Professional Development

Teachers must be active agents in any system/school change, and their competencies should be developed through both initial teacher education and continuing professional development. Teachers develop the necessary values, dispositions, skills, knowledge and understandings to ensure the learning and full participation of all pupils in every classroom, throughout their career.

Recent re-conceptualisation of initial teacher education programmes requires that all graduates now complete modules on inclusive education. However, the level of professional preparation is limited and not sufficient to sustain teachers throughout their careers, particularly in the light of increasing complexity of school contexts. It is difficult at present for teachers to access further recognised (post-graduate) courses and professional development available through SESS (now NCSE) or the Diploma courses in special education in the Colleges of Education / Universities. In order to be deemed eligible to apply for such courses, a teacher must first be employed in a special education setting. This condition contradicts a policy of inclusion.

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). Access to continuous professional development must be sustained on an ongoing basis to ensure teachers are supported throughout their careers in updating their knowledge and skills about practice in special needs and inclusive education. 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 to ensure that they are prepared in advance of their allocation to a special class. Furthermore, teachers should also have the opportunity to visit other special classes and special schools to see, at first hand, how these settings operate.

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 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 appropriate advice, support and professional development to teachers.

Support from a mentor would be particularly helpful to newly qualified teachers, who often find the management of behaviour to be the most challenging aspect of their jobs. Support from an inclusion mentor may also be helpful to school staffs who wish to promote discussion and co-operation on the issue of behaviour. Facilitation of such a mentor position should be via provision of a Post of Responsibility or of release time with sub cover.

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 fully-resourced 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
- 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, in addition to psychologists, 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;
- consideration be given to funding teachers to undertake the professional qualification in educational psychology;
- consideration be given to developing and funding post-graduate courses for teachers to enable them to undertake qualifications in speech therapy, occupational therapy and behavioural therapy.

Special Needs Assistants

The INTO notes the publication of the report on the review of the SNA scheme and welcomes the announcement that there will be no diminution in the support available from SNAs to support pupils in our primary schools. However, additional SNAs must be available when required. Schools must have access to extra SNA support if new needs arise/are identified and must not be made to wait for the next SNA allocation Review.

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 inclusion, the INTO recommends that adequate SNA support be available for all pupils with special care 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 or occasional basis, as appropriate.

INTO has concerns regarding the notion of shared access to an SNA. For children with additional needs, shared access means an SNA may not be in the room when required leading to safety concerns, communication difficulties, emotional and behavioural challenges, or reduced learning outcomes. Shared access means an SNA may not be available to children in the yard when the child needs them to help identify and solve social conflict, find resolution to friendship problems, or ensure their physical safety in a very busy environment.

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 and training 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 beyond the remit of the class teacher. The lack of availability of in-school, multi-disciplinary supports is a critical issue 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. Children who are most in need do not have access to HSE professionals to work directly with them e.g. psychologists, therapists etc. 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 interdepartmental approach with collaboration between education and health departments in pioneering a demonstration 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).

The HSE and DES need to consult with each other 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 waiting lists for the Early Intervention teams and the Primary Care Teams, are unacceptable and must be reduced. Children can wait many years for interventions and it is often too late when they are offered support. Children should not have to rely on their parents' ability to pay for private assessments. Children must not be dropped from Early Intervention Teams only to find themselves on two year waiting list for support from the primary care team.

The provision of special classes for Speech and Language Disorders should continue as they provide intensive early intervention for pupils that require the support of teachers and Speech and Language therapists working together. Better educational planning to ensure that services are delivered in a coherent and unified way for all children with SEN, regardless of setting, is required as is more

communication with schools regarding the supports available. 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 children with special education needs in an inclusive system.

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.

Challenging Behaviour and Crisis Situations

Emerson (1995) has developed a definition of challenging behaviour that has become widely used in the context of learning disabilities:

“behaviour of such intensity, frequency and duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit or delay access to, and use of, ordinary facilities”

In general terms, teachers accept that challenging behaviour in the school context encompasses behaviour that:

- interferes with the pupil’s own and/or other pupils’ learning;
- challenges the day-to-day functioning of the school;
- challenges the right of staff and pupils to a safe and orderly environment;
- has a duration, frequency, intensity or persistence that is beyond the normal range of what schools tolerate; and
- is less likely to be responsive to the usual range of interventions used by the school for pupil misbehaviour.

Incidents of challenging behaviour have become increasingly prevalent in primary schools. In many cases, pupils’ needs are not being met as schools do not have sufficient supports to provide counselling or behaviour and emotional support where it is required. For their own safety, and for the safety of other pupils and staff, some pupils need individual teaching, or gradual inclusion with their peers, pending the addressing of their behaviour and emotional issues. Teachers find it extremely difficult to respond to episodes of challenging behaviour without access to the necessary clinical and therapeutic advice. Teachers should not be left alone in high risk situations.

There is a clear and urgent need for guidelines for schools and teachers in relation to dealing with crisis situations, particularly emergency procedures for crisis situations arising from incidences of challenging behaviour and violent outbursts. Teachers and principal teachers are 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 imperative that guidelines be accompanied by CPD. Such guidelines should also have legal standing to protect school staff and pupils. Teachers need to be protected from any potential accusations of assault where they intervene appropriately 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. Teachers need to be supported in order to facilitate inclusion.

The DES has 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) which poses a potential risk of exposure to infectious conditions.

The INTO recommends that:

- the DES should issue guidelines immediately to support schools in relation to handling situations 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 violent outbursts and in relation to use of appropriate 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 schools, in ASD and other special classes and in special schools. The DES and the NCSE need to acknowledge and address teachers' needs and experiences, including their health and safety needs and their need for professional development. For a policy of inclusion to be successful, teachers must be supported with professional development opportunities, multi-disciplinary services and adequate resources and facilities.

The idea that all children should attend their local school has merit. Some children who attend special schools or special classes outside their own area spend an hour or more travelling to school and home again. However, some children require specialist support, sometimes for short-term interventions while for others longer-term specialist support may be required. To date, the system has been poor in supporting local efforts to encourage dual enrolment of pupils in both special and mainstream schools to enhance inclusion for pupils. In the current context, 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. Consideration could be given to co-locating special schools on the same campus as mainstream schools as a start, particularly given that some special schools are in need of new accommodation.

If Ireland were to ensure that all children could attend their local school regardless of educational need, the whole system would need to be redesigned and re-conceptualised from the beginning to ensure a fully inclusive curriculum, in fully accessible buildings, with highly qualified teachers for inclusive education, multi-disciplinary teams in all schools, classroom spaces for whole-class work, small group work and individual work, nurture, sensory and therapy rooms, much smaller class sizes and all necessary materials and equipment. We know from the experience of teachers in New Brunswick,

Canada, that the aspiration of a fully inclusive system has not been supported by the provision of sufficient resources to make the goal of inclusion a reality. Based on experiences of inadequately supported inclusion to date, Irish teachers do not have trust and faith that our Government will follow through on the aspirations for a fully inclusive local school for every child.

It must be acknowledged, however, that even with full resourcing there will still be a minority of pupils for whom a Special School or Special Class setting will be the appropriate placement. It is important that the individual needs of each pupil be the over-riding consideration in deciding on what the appropriate placement is for that pupil.

APPENDIX 1

An Inclusive School

Some Requirements

School Buildings

- universal educational design
- access to school buildings – doorways, pathways, wide corridors
- permanent buildings
- breakout room /quiet space / nurture rooms / sensory rooms /soft rooms
- toilets / shower/ changing facilities
- indoor and outdoor play areas

Resources and Supports

- much smaller class sizes
- sensory equipment
- appropriate means of transport for children with special needs
- adequate SNA support to reflect the increasing complexity of enrolments.
- multi-disciplinary teams (including Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Psychiatrists and Nursing staff) available to all schools
- increased provision of Educational Psychologists (NEPS) to schools
- mental health supports for pupils in schools and CAMHS fully staffed to meet the needs of all children with emotional and behavioural disorders behavioural disorders
- provision of play, art and music therapy where such therapies are of benefit to pupils
- guidelines on assaults and physical interventions when required
- full-time qualified school secretaries in all schools

Teachers

- comprehensive training and professional development in inclusive education during initial teacher education
- additional professional development for teachers in specialist settings (special schools or classes) prior to taking up such a teaching position
- continuous professional development for all teachers throughout their careers
- vaccination programmes for school staff

Policies

- development of transition protocols around the transfer of information regarding special educational needs between pre-schools, primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools.

APPENDIX 2

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities

1. States Parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. With a view to realizing this right without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity, States Parties shall ensure an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to:
 - a. the full development of human potential and sense of dignity and self-worth, and the strengthening of respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and human diversity;
 - b. the development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential;
 - c. enabling persons with disabilities to participate effectively in a free society.

2. In realizing this right, States Parties shall ensure that:
 - a. persons with disabilities are not excluded from the general education system on the basis of disability, and that children with disabilities are not excluded from free and compulsory primary education, or from secondary education, on the basis of disability;
 - b. persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live;
 - c. reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided;
 - d) persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education;
 - e) effective individualized support measures are provided in environments that maximize academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion.

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