

INTO Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Autism

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**INTO Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Committee
on Autism**

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1. Introduction

The INTO is the oldest and largest teachers' trade union in Ireland. It represents almost 50,000 teachers at both primary in the Republic of Ireland and primary and post primary level in Northern Ireland.

We welcome the opportunity to address the Committee. Today we will focus on:

- Access to assessment and early intervention
- Issues with assessment of need
- Education: Some current challenges
- Public buildings – the need for autism friendly school buildings

2. Background

There are currently 3,329 primary schools listed on the Department of Education's website. In the 2022-23 school year, there will be 1,548 Autism classes and Early Intervention classes across all primary schools. This figure shows an increase of 674 classes since 2018-19 and indicates an almost doubling of the number of Autism classes from 743 to 1,404. Schools are committed to providing inclusive education and these statistics speak for themselves.

As inclusive education has evolved in more recent years, ASD and special classes have become an integral and essential part of the Irish education system. It is important that the State continues to offer a range of provision 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 across a continuum of provision, must continue to be available to parents.

3. Access to assessment and early intervention

In making this submission we would like to emphasise that the INTO has long advocated the need for improvements to educational provision for students with ASD. In 2014, the INTO called for increased emphasis on early intervention, targeted professional development relating to ASD and improvements regarding the transfer of information process.

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 of having a child who is either misplaced in a mainstream setting or for whom the back-up support services are not being provided by the State. The maintenance of a continuum of provision to include ASD and special classes is essential to ensure that the educational needs of all children are met.

An inclusive approach to education that is not fully supported through the provision of resources, support and therapeutic services and professional development places an intolerable burden on families and on school communities.

Pupils who access ASD classes and Early Intervention ASD classes have unique additional needs that require specific therapeutic support that is often beyond the remit of the teacher. 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 continue to pilot a model of in-school speech and language

therapy, and further recommends that other therapies, including mental health supports, should be available onsite at school. It is imperative that the Department of Education (DE) and their counterparts in the Department of Health and the 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.

Collaborative multidisciplinary assessments should also be readily available in a pre-school setting to facilitate early intervention. Timely access to therapeutic supports and other services is essential in early years settings and Early Intervention ASD Classes are to provide targeted interventions at an early stage in a child's education.

Schools should be better supported with the transition of children with special educational needs from pre-school to primary and from primary to post-primary level. Protocols should be agreed around the transfer of information and continuity of support to ensure that there is no gap in the provision of resources. It is regrettable that the increase in special classes at primary level is not currently matched by a corresponding increase in special class provision at second level. This creates significant difficulties for pupils transferring from primary to post primary, particularly those who require a continuity of experience and support

4. Assessment of need (AON)

The Disability Act 2005 provides for the assessment of health and education needs of persons with disabilities as occasioned by those disabilities. All children and young people born on or after 1st June 2002 are eligible to apply for an Assessment of Need under Part 2 of the Disability Act (2005) regardless of their age at the time of application. The INTO is painfully aware that the Health Services Executive (HSE) is currently unable to provide assessments as envisioned in the Act. Children all over the country are currently awaiting a full assessment to determine whether they have a disability as defined by the Act, the diagnosis of which could lead to more targeted interventions and supports being provided in schools and early years settings.

Following a legal judgement in 2021, the NCSE now has the responsibility to nominate an appropriate person to carry out an assessment of education needs of children on behalf of the HSE under the Assessment of Need (AON) process.

This Assessment of Education Needs will be informed by existing school-based information, which provides details of a student's education needs identified by the school. Schools will need to be supported by the NCSE and the Department of Education in providing the information necessary. INTO is calling for substituted release time for the school personnel responsible for the compilation of the Assessment of Education Needs, given the importance of this element of the process. We are also calling for the State to do all in its power to ensure that there are sufficient personnel in all HSE areas to carry out an effective AON under the 2005 Act.

The expectation gap between schools and the HSE needs to be closed and a clear policy developed regarding the provision of services to children.

5. Education: Some challenges

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 advocates better planning across the system for the establishment of special classes for children with ASD to ensure all



pupils have access irrespective of demographics or geographical location. The union notes the engagement of schools to date evidenced by the exceptional increase in provision since 2018.

The INTO also condemns the recent naming of four Dublin schools by Minister Josepha Madigan and once again calls in the Minister to apologise to the schools in question.

We also welcome the recent publication of *Professional Practice Guideline for the Assessment, Formulation and Diagnosis of Autism in Children and Adolescents* (PSI, 2022) which should prove invaluable to psychologists.

The INTO also notes with positivity the proposals 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.

However, the INTO believes that induction and ongoing professional development are vital for teachers working in special education settings. In that regard, the INTO welcomes the NCSE recommendation that special class teachers 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).

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 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.

Ongoing continuous professional development must be provided to ensure teachers engage in current and best practice.

6. Public Buildings- School Buildings

We are aware of, and support calls for public buildings to be more Autism friendly.

However, the provision of ASD classes in primary schools is not as simple as identifying space and providing adequate furniture.

ASD classrooms need to be correctly designed as suitable learning environments for children with ASD, particularly those with associated sensory needs. Outside of the ASD classroom, schools need to be reconfigured with indoor and outdoor sensory spaces and learning environments.

Issues such as lighting, noise management and school colour schemes need to be addressed throughout the building to facilitate inclusion. Outdoor areas including pathways, walkways and play areas also need to be designed to meet the needs of all pupils. All ASD classrooms and the schools providing them need to be fully and properly resourced.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, teachers are to the fore in making inclusion a reality in mainstream, ASD and special classes. The DE 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 teachers in ASD and special classes 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 on

the provision of ASD and special classes and explored this issue at its biennial Special Education Conference in March 2019.

The INTO strongly believes that ASD and special classes can, and must, continue to provide an essential part of the continuum of provision for children with special educational needs and looks forward to engaging in more detailed discussions on the issue.

Míle buíochas as ucht bhur gcuid ama ar maidin.

References:

INTO (2014) Delivery for Students with Special Educational Needs (INTO Response) [Link](#)

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

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

INTO (2019) Special Education Conference: *Inclusion – A Continuum of Support* [Link](#)

Psychological Society of Ireland (2022) *Professional Practice Guidelines for the Assessment, Formulation and Diagnosis of Autism in Children and Adolescents* (2nd Ed)

