



Irish National Teachers' Organisation  
Cumann Múinteoirí Éireann

# INTO SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY

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Vere Foster House  
35 Parnell Square  
Dublin 1  
D01 ET35

Phone: 01 804 7700  
Email: [info@into.ie](mailto:info@into.ie)  
Web: [www.into.ie](http://www.into.ie)  
General Secretary: **John Boyle**

## **Introduction**

As Ireland's oldest and largest teachers' trade union, representing over 50,000 teachers across the island, the INTO is acutely aware of the challenges faced by children with additional needs. This policy document has been drafted following engagement with, and feedback from, INTO members at the INTO Special Education Conference held on February 24th, 2024.

The INTO supports an inclusive approach to education and recognises the constitutional right of all children to access an education tailored to their individual needs, as articulated in the *Education Act 1998*:

“There is made available to each person resident in the State, including a person with a disability or who has other special educational needs, support services and a level and quality of education appropriate to meeting the needs and abilities of that person.”

Over the years, developments in legislation and case law have shaped the landscape of inclusive education. Key documents include the *Disability Act 2005*, *The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018*, *The Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022*, *The Irish Sign Language Act 2017*, and Ireland's formal ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)* in 2018.

Despite these legislative advances, significant gaps persist in the provision of essential support services, particularly those under the remit of the Health Service Executive (HSE). Schools have increasingly become the de facto providers of wellbeing and support for children outside of their family. Despite the challenges associated with this, the INTO and its members remain steadfast in our commitment to supporting all pupils, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

In the 20 years since the enactment of the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004*, the INTO has consistently called on the Department of Education (DE) to allocate adequate funding, staffing, resources, and buildings to support all pupils and to fulfil their promises of an inclusive education system for all children.

## An Inclusive System

The INTO is committed to inclusion and believes that all children, regardless of their individual needs, must be given the opportunity to thrive within our education system. Thousands of pupils with additional needs have received an inclusive education due to the dedication of INTO members, who provide high-quality teaching and support in the absence of adequate resources and additional services.

There is no single practical definition of what inclusive education is, or more importantly how it works in practice. The Irish Constitution recognises the rights of parental choice in relation to the school their children attend. Article 42.3.1 states “*The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State*”. The current context in Ireland provides a continuum of provision in relation to children with special educational needs, and INTO believes that this is essential to meet the diverse needs of pupils. This continuum must include early years settings, special schools, a wide range of special classes supporting children with various disabilities, and properly resourced support within mainstream schools, ensuring that children are placed in an environment that best meets their educational and developmental needs. There must also be a recognition that all children, whether they have special educational needs or not, are entitled to a good quality educational experience.

The recent figures provided by the DE highlight the challenges in providing enough places at certain stages of this continuum. They estimate that 5% of student population may be in special education placement by 2030 (up from 2.8%). This is driven largely by an increase in the diagnosis of children with autism and related conditions, while the general pupil population is predicted to decrease.

This continuum must also provide for appropriate early years education. Our education system currently lacks clear policies to support transitions from early years settings to primary education. Of particular concern is the failure to transfer information gathered through the AIM model in early years to primary schools, resulting in a breakdown of continuity. This gap places additional strain on schools as they work to plan for and meet the needs of children with additional learning needs. The absence of early intervention supports caused by inadequate HSE resources compounds this issue, making it harder to identify and address children’s needs before they enter primary school.

The INTO calls for a national transition framework that provides for seamless handovers from early years settings to primary schools. This framework must include a standardised transition tool, such as *Mó Scéal*, to ensure that information follows the child and supports the continuity of care and learning.

The majority of pupils with SEN spend most of their school day in mainstream classes. To ensure these pupils receive the support they need, the INTO demands the reduction of class sizes to a maximum of 19 in mainstream settings and 15 in DEIS Band One schools. Additionally, class sizes in special schools and special classes must also be reduced.

It is a national embarrassment that Ireland's average primary school class size remains 3.5 pupils above the EU average of 19. In the 2023/24 school year alone, over 250,000 primary pupils were in classes of 25 or more. This is particularly concerning as the number of pupils with SEN in mainstream classes continues to rise, alongside an increasing cohort of children with a diverse range of additional needs.

Overcrowded classrooms severely limit teachers' capacity to provide the tailored, differentiated instruction that these pupils require to make meaningful progress. Smaller class sizes are essential to create learning environments where every child can receive the individual attention they need to thrive.

Research conducted by the INTO (2022) highlights the significant workload associated with responding to additional needs and liaising with various agencies. To address this, clustering arrangements for SET teachers could enhance collaboration within and between schools. Additionally, 98% of respondents supported substitutable release time for teachers to engage with external specialists (e.g., NEPS, NCSE) to ensure appropriate, individualised plans for pupils with additional needs.

Inclusive learning requires collaborative planning and preparation involving all teachers and staff working with a pupil, alongside the child's parents/guardians and the child themselves. This collaborative effort ensures agreement on educational and care provision and the delivery of necessary supports. While teachers play a critical role, they must be supported by other professionals, such as SLTs, OTs and psychologists to address a child's additional needs effectively.

In every educational setting, it is essential that children are taught by a fully qualified teacher every day. The INTO continues to campaign for all teacher absences to be covered by qualified substitute teachers. It is unacceptable that school leaders are forced to deploy SETs to cover absences in mainstream classes, disrupting support for pupils with additional needs.

All approved teacher absences must be covered by substitute cover and the government must take immediate action to resolve the ongoing teacher supply crisis.

Every day, teachers go above and beyond to meet the needs of their pupils, despite limited resources and inadequate external supports. The current reality is stark, with over 100,000 children on waiting lists for therapies and support services. This situation is completely unacceptable and deeply distressing for families and children, who suffer due to government inaction. No child should be left behind due to a lack of resources and support.

The INTO will continue to hold the government to account and demands immediate action to address these systemic failures.

## ***Supports for children with special educational needs – the Irish context***

Teachers, families and advocacy groups continue to highlight the ongoing crisis in securing adequate school places and resources for children with additional needs. They report that supports are inconsistent and often insufficient, leading to a reliance on private services, which come with significant costs. This issue is compounded by excessively long HSE waiting lists for assessments and services. The failure to recruit and retain Children's Disability Network Teams (CNDTs) at local level means that children's needs are not being identified and met. The consequence of this under resourcing is that parents have resorted to litigation to vindicate their rights. A system driven by litigation sees resources diverted into the legal profession, away from our schools where they are most needed.

There are ongoing concerns about the adequacy of supports for special education. Given the experience of our members, INTO argues that the number of SEN Teachers in the system falls short of meeting the increasing needs of pupils in our schools. Recruitment and retention challenges, alongside schools' inability to avail of a reflexive drawdown of SEN supports when needed, continues to complicate the resourcing of additional supports for schools and their pupils.

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 inadequacy of the supports being provided to children by professionals from other disciplines undermines the work of schools and teachers. The current situation where over 230,000 people are on waiting lists for community health care, including for therapies and a diverse range of disability services such as physiotherapy, dietetics, speech and language and occupational therapy must be tackled head on by government.

The INTO strongly supports an in-school therapy model similar to the School Inclusion Model (SIM) pilot launched by the Department of Education in March 2019. Schools participating in the pilot have experienced the benefits of working with other professionals. Teachers, as educational professionals, are not qualified to undertake the work of therapeutic specialists. INTO is adamant that that this in-school service must be provided to all primary schools nationwide in addition to and not in place of one-to-one therapies for children and young people.

Public mental health services in Ireland are in crisis. Ireland spends 6% of its health budget on mental health services, significantly less than the 12-13% spent by other European countries. The situation for children and adolescents is particularly dire. In their opening statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Health, the Families for Reform of CAMHS (The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services) described the service as "largely non-existent", with approximately 4,400 children on waiting lists for first-time appointments and significant staffing shortages. Consequently, many children are left without the support they need. Issues such

as school refusal, self-harm, and a high prevalence of anxiety and depression among young people are prevalent. The group also noted that children with autism or intellectual disabilities face significant barriers in accessing appropriate mental health supports.

Report 7 of *The Children's School Lives* (CSL) study notes the importance of wellbeing in education. Wellbeing is essential for enabling children to fulfil their potential and is a key focus in the Irish education system. The CSL study found that positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment are critical components of children's wellbeing. However, the study also revealed that positive emotions tend to decrease as children get older, with anxiety increasing as children progress through primary school. The report noted that teachers play a major role in supporting children's wellbeing, but face challenges due to a lack of training and the absence of external therapeutic supports.

The INTO expresses its dismay and frustration over the systemic failures which are severely impacting on pupils' learning, wellbeing, and mental health. These failures are now placing undue pressure on teachers and schools to compensate for the dearth of therapeutic supports. The INTO believes that it is incumbent on government to provide these much-needed bespoke school supports through the Department of Education rather than schools having to compete with other sectors for assistance urgently required by pupils. The INTO is committed to holding the government to account and demands immediate action to rectify the systemic deficiencies which are currently allowing a generation of children and their teachers to struggle in an inadequately supported education system.

### *In-School Counselling Pilot Scheme*

Following INTO's pre-budget campaigning in 2022, a two-strand programme of counselling supports was introduced as a pilot in primary schools, running from 2023 to 2025. Strand 1 began in Cavan, Laois, Leitrim, Longford, Mayo, Monaghan, and Tipperary and was later extended in October 2024 to include 61 schools in Dublin Southwest and North Dublin City. Schools in Strand 1 received in-person counselling sessions for a small number of children, with these sessions book-ended by pre- and post-session meetings involving parents or guardians and relevant school staff.

Strand 2 of the pilot introduced Education Wellbeing Teams to clusters of schools across Carlow, Cork, Dublin 7 and Dublin 16. Schools in these areas benefitted from the involvement of Education Wellbeing Practitioners, who worked under the supervision of NEPS psychologists. This strand focused on preventative approaches to wellbeing and mental health at a whole-school level, providing psycho-educational support to parents, staff, and pupils, and using evidence-based therapeutic approaches to address emerging wellbeing needs.

The pilot has received positive feedback from participating schools, who have reported benefits for pupils and staff. The INTO calls for the nationwide roll-out of the most successful aspects of this programme from September 2025 to ensure all schools have access to quality counselling supports.

## *Educational Therapy Support Service*

The INTO called on the Department of Education and the NCSE to take responsibility for the recruitment of therapists and behavioural supports to address the critical gaps in therapeutic supports for schools at the INTO Special Education Symposium in February 2024. Responding to this advocacy, the Department announced the establishment of the Educational Therapy Support Service, under the NCSE, in June 2024.

The ETSS has begun the appointment of occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and behaviour practitioners, to work directly with schools. These professionals will work alongside teachers to design and deliver interventions that address pupil needs.

While the INTO welcomes this initiative as a significant step forward, it is clear that the current allocation of 44 professionals is grossly inadequate to meet the needs of schools nationwide. The INTO demands that the government expand the ETSS until it adequately serves all primary and special schools, ensuring that no child is left without these essential supports.

## ***Responsibilities of School Management as Employers***

Schools and teachers working to provide education for children with SEN face many challenges and must be supported by their employers. Boards of Management (BOM) of primary schools are the legal employers of teachers and have a duty to ensure a safe working environment for all staff. The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 requires all employers to provide, as far as is reasonably practicable, a safe place of work, including the prevention of risks to health. They must also ensure appropriate systems are in place to manage workplace safety. The same obligations apply to a BOM as to any other employer. Failure to meet these obligations may result in a breach of employment law, pointing to a need for BOMs and principals to pro-actively manage risks, implement policies, and address safety concerns to protect both staff and pupils in the school environment.

This responsibility is particularly important in the context of Special Education, where teachers and staff may face additional workplace challenges. In managing risk in special education settings BOMs and Principal teachers must ensure that adequate staffing levels, training, and policies are in place to address specific challenges such as physical interventions, and the prevention of workplace injury. The BOMs of all schools must recognise that their duty of care extends to ensuring that staff working with pupils with SEN are protected from unreasonable risk and are provided with the necessary supports to undertake their roles safely and effectively.

In fulfilling their duties BOMs and Principals must adhere to the reporting obligations set out by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA). Schools are required to report certain workplace incidents to the HSA, including accidents that result in serious injury or cause an employee to miss more than three consecutive days of work. Additionally, incidents involving non-employees, such as pupils or visitors, must be reported if they result in serious injury requiring hospital treatment. Reports to the HSA must be submitted within ten working days through

the HSA's online portal or in hardcopy, using the appropriate incident reporting form (IR1 for injuries or IR3 for dangerous occurrences).

The voluntary nature of BOMs in primary schools remains a challenge for school governance. BOM members, drawn from the local community, parents, and school staff, give their time and expertise on an unpaid basis. Expecting volunteers to fully engage with the intricacies of employment legislation is increasingly unreasonable. The role of BOM members has evolved far beyond its original community-focused intent to one that now carries significant legal, financial, and managerial responsibilities. A review of the supports for the management of schools is urgently needed, with consideration given to providing professional support for BOMs or transitioning to a more formalised structure to ensure schools are managed effectively and sustainably.

### ***The Role of the Principal***

The responsibility placed on principal teachers to manage schools is significant and continues to grow more complex as the needs of all stakeholders increase. Principals, as the day-to-day managers of schools, are tasked with balancing teaching and learning with the wellbeing of staff, pupils, and the wider school community. This role has become uniquely challenging in recent years due to the rising demands of the Department of Education, additional school-based initiatives, increased incidences of complex behaviours, and a growing administrative burden.

The INTO engages daily with principals regarding the stress and burnout associated with the role including the demands of managing staff, engaging with parents, liaising with external agencies, and navigating ever-evolving educational policies, with limited support and ever-increasing administration. The INTO has continuously called for additional supports from both patron bodies and the Department of Education, to ensure principals can continue in their role without compromising their own wellbeing. This includes fully resourced in-school management teams and administrative support to allow principals to carry out their role effectively. Administrative time for teaching principals is essential and all policies and procedures being put in place must be properly assessed at the development stage for their impact on principals' workload.

### ***Building Teacher Capacity***

Teachers are caring and diligent professionals who regularly engage in CPD while striving to meet the needs of the pupils in their care. The INTO believes that expertise on inclusive education must be built throughout a teacher's career. Recent changes to initial teacher education programmes require that all graduates now complete modules on inclusive education. However, this professional preparation is not sufficient to sustain teachers throughout their careers, particularly in the light of the increasing complexity of needs presenting in schools. The INTO proposes that all student teachers must complete at least one school placement during their time in initial teacher education in a special education setting. This would be beneficial to them when starting out in their careers as well as benefiting the schools in which they work.



Experienced teachers would also value further opportunities for professional development. The INTO believes that OIDE and the NCSE must develop cross-organisational teams to ensure access to high-quality CPD in inclusive education for all teachers. Training should be comprehensive, regularly available, and provided at no cost to teachers or schools. Current delays in delivering CPD, particularly for teachers in ASD and special classes, are unacceptable. Training delivered after the school year has commenced disrupts learning and leaves teachers inadequately prepared. The INTO also recommends that the number of places on the Diploma in Special Education courses be doubled with priority access to the extra places being given to teachers in special classes.

Teachers who gain additional qualifications in special education bring valuable knowledge to their schools, yet the DE does not currently recognise these qualifications with additional allowances. The INTO calls for the reinstatement of the Special Education Diploma Allowance to incentivise teachers to pursue further study and qualifications in the area of SEN. In order to incentivise the retention of teachers in special schools and special classes the INTO is advocating for the introduction of additional allowances for teachers working in these settings.

## ***Universal Design For Learning***

Inclusive education should be underpinned by the principles of UDL, which must extend across all aspects of education provision, including school buildings, curriculum planning, resources, and individualised supports. Merely placing a child with additional needs in a mainstream setting does not constitute true inclusion. True inclusion requires comprehensive wrap around supports and resources tailored to the child's needs. Effective inclusive education benefits not only pupils with additional needs but also creates an environment where all children can thrive. Genuine inclusion ensures that diversity is embraced, and barriers to learning are removed, allowing every child to achieve their full potential.

The INTO has a keen interest in the UDL Pilot being carried out by the NCSE. The union will closely monitor the results of this pilot while maintaining active engagement with the schools involved.

## ***Collaboration and Support for Schools***

The INTO strongly advocates for closer professional relationships between schools and Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) to ensure effective planning and support for pupils with additional needs.

The INTO welcomed recent Budget commitments to recruit additional SENOs and National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists. The INTO calls for these recruitment efforts to be sustained until all schools are adequately supported, with a manageable caseload ratio of 25 schools per SENO or psychologist. To enhance collaboration and understanding, the INTO also calls for frequent in-person visits by SENOs, enabling them to proactively support schools and pupils.

The INTO notes the frustration felt by principals regarding the review processes managed by the NCSE. While the revised appeals process introduced in 2024 is a positive step, further improvements are required to ensure that the system is user-friendly, transparent, and responsive to the needs of schools and pupils.

## Conclusion

The failure of successive governments to adequately provide for pupils with additional needs is nothing short of a national disgrace. Despite legislative commitments and international obligations, thousands of children and their families face a system riddled with barriers and inefficiencies. From endless waiting lists for assessments and therapeutic supports to the lack of sufficient school places, parents are forced into battles for the most basic supports. These struggles endured by families, are a damning indictment of a system that has failed to prioritise those most in need.

Against this backdrop, Irish teachers and school leaders stand as pillars of resilience and dedication. With limited resources and often overwhelming challenges, they deliver a world leading education to pupils, ensuring every child is given the opportunity to succeed. The hard work of teachers and principals cannot be overstated. They go above and beyond to provide inclusive learning environments, filling the gaps left by an underfunded and overstretched system.

The expectation that schools should compensate for systemic failures is both unsustainable and deeply unfair. Teachers are not therapists or social workers, yet they are increasingly burdened with responsibilities outside their professional remit. This has placed pressure on schools to bolster the country's crumbling support networks.

The INTO will continue to hold the Government and DE to account until every child with additional needs receives the education, supports, and respect they deserve. The time for piecemeal measures has long passed. What is needed now is a decisive, and comprehensive plan to address the shortfalls in special education and therapeutic supports. It is time for this country to live up to its promises and ensure that no child is left behind.

As esteemed Uachtarán na h-Éireann Michael D Higgins once said:

**'The true test of a democratic society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.'**

## **INTO Recommendations**

### *1. Early Intervention and Transitions*

- Implement a national early intervention programme to identify and support pupils with additional needs from early years through to the end of tertiary education.
- Provide multidisciplinary assessments in pre-school settings to support early intervention.
- Develop and implement a national framework for transitions, ensuring continuity of care and learning.
- Ensure all supports and resources allocated in early years settings transition with the child into primary education, facilitated by tools like 'Mó Scéal'.

### *2. Support for Children with Additional Needs*

- Guarantee that all children who require SNA support have timely and adequate access to them.
- Reduce class sizes to a maximum of 19 in mainstream schools and 15 in DEIS Band 1 schools
- Provide resources to schools to address the mental health needs of pupils and deliver individualised counselling supports in both mainstream and special school settings.
- Increase funding for CAMHS to reduce waiting lists and improve access to mental health services.

### *3. Therapeutic and Specialist Services*

- Through ETSS roll out in-school therapies on a national level with adequate resourcing.
- Ensure therapeutic specialist services are prompt, effective, and sufficiently resourced to meet pupils' needs.
- Increase the availability of nursing care staff and multi-disciplinary professionals in special school settings to deliver individualised support.

### *4. Resourcing and Staffing*

- Adequately resource the NCSE and NEPS by recruiting additional professionals to eliminate delays in supports.
- Increase the provision of NEPS psychologists until a caseload ratio of 25 schools per psychologist is reached.
- Increase the provision of NCSE SENOs until a caseload ratio of 25 schools per SENO is reached
- Backfill all staff absences within national support services to maintain service provision to schools.
- Provide substitute cover for all approved teacher absences, ensuring continuity in teaching and learning.

## *5. Teacher Support and Professional Development*

- Provide ongoing and accessible, and fully funded CPD for all teachers on supporting children with SEN, particularly focusing on planning and delivering inclusive teaching and learning.
- Fund professional development opportunities in special classes and reinstate allowances for additional qualifications, including post-graduate special education diploma, masters and doctorate courses.
- Expand access to post-graduate courses in special education to all teachers, regardless of their current teaching role and in particular double the number of places on the special education diploma courses.
- Require all student teachers to complete at least one school placement in a special education setting to build early expertise.
- Establish cross-organisational teams within OIDE and NCSE to ensure all teachers can access CPD in special and inclusive education.

## *6. Collaboration and Planning*

- Allocate discrete in-school time for teacher collaboration and planning, supporting the development of inclusive practices.
- Promote stronger engagement with parents by national support services to align expectations with the resources schools can provide.

## *7. Centralised Systems and Processes*

- Develop a centralised pupil database to streamline the updating of pupil information and resource allocation, ensuring clear communication with schools and parents before implementation.
- Regularly review the Exceptional Review Process.

## *8. Principal Support*

- Provide targeted wellbeing support for principals, recognising the growing complexity and workload associated with their roles.
- Reinstate and expand Assistant Principal (AP) posts to support a strong middle management structure in schools.

## *9. Guidelines*

- Provide training on the Behaviours of Concern guidelines and the management of challenging behaviours to all teachers.

## *10. Health and Safety*

- Establish a health and safety support unit within the Department of Education to provide guidance to schools.
- Make health and safety training mandatory for members of boards of management so they fully understand their obligations as employers.

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