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# ESSENTIAL SUPPORTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION - INTO RECOMMENDATIONS



## Introduction

The INTO is committed to an inclusive education system that meets the needs of all children, especially those with additional educational needs, but teachers cannot facilitate this on their own. They need more support from the Department of Education (DE), its agencies and aegis bodies and other professionals.

Having consulted with members at an *INTO Symposium on Special Education* in February 2024 and since then at branch meetings and other union events, the INTO now sets out what it believes to be the essential supports required for special education to thrive in Ireland.

In January 2024, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) published a policy advice paper titled *Special Schools and Classes: An Inclusive Education for an Inclusive Society*. The document acknowledges that, while ideally all children, regardless of need and ability, should be educated together, a continuum of provision must be maintained in Ireland. Special classes are an important part of this continuum and should be established in every school where the need for such a class exists.

The INTO believes that a wide range of special classes are required, that more special school places are vital and that additional supports must be provided for children with additional needs who are being taught in mainstream classes.

## INTO recommendations: Essential supports for special education

### Infrastructure and resourcing

- ⌘ All special education placements must be appropriate to the needs of the pupil.
- ⌘ A continuum of special education provision (from class-based support to special schools) must be available to children in every part of the country.
- ⌘ Schools should be properly funded and resourced to accommodate children with special education needs (SEN) in mainstream classrooms where appropriate. This will require smaller class sizes (19:1 in non-DEIS schools, 15:1 in DEIS schools). Class sizes in special schools and special classes should also be reduced.
- ⌘ The special education teacher (SET) allocation model must be reviewed to ensure that the current criteria are refined and the results of standardised tests are de-emphasised. Issues that must be taken into account when allocating special education teaching supports include: a weighting for pupils in junior classes; support for children whose home language is not English or Irish but who do not meet the current criteria for EAL support; multi-grade classes; Gaeltacht schools and Gaelscoileanna; and the number of children with multiple additional needs. The DE should also ensure that the Primary Online Database (POD) is updated to reflect the relevant data needed to facilitate the implementation of this improved model of allocation.
- ⌘ Grants and funding for the establishment of special classrooms, appropriate self-regulation and sensory spaces, adapted indoor and outdoor play areas, and all necessary furniture and equipment must be provided to all schools before special classes are opened.



- ‡ Accommodation must be fit for purpose, and new builds must be sanctioned wherever necessary. Schools must be supported to adapt mainstream classrooms as needed to accommodate pupils with additional needs.
- ‡ All new and refurbished buildings must meet universal educational design standards for accessibility (access and egress, corridors, toilets, showers, changing facilities).
- ‡ Appropriate means of transport must be made available for children with additional educational needs to access their school place.

## Training and professional development

- ‡ All initial teacher education (ITE) programmes should provide student teachers with the opportunity to complete at least one school placement in a special education setting.
- ‡ All teachers should receive comprehensive training on the teaching of pupils with SEN across the continuum of teacher education. This training should be available to teachers as needed throughout their careers from ITE onwards. A flexible suite of delivery methods to meet the needs of teachers in all settings must be provided.
- ‡ Training should be provided to teachers and other relevant school staff in a timely manner, ideally before they take up their roles in the special class, and regularly thereafter.
- ‡ The number of places on the postgraduate certificate/diploma programmes for teachers working with students with SEN should be increased substantially.
- ‡ All teachers must receive training on the *Guidelines on Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations* as a matter of priority.
- ‡ A health and safety support unit within the DE must be established to provide guidance to school staff and members of boards of management.

## Other school supports

- ‡ Targeted wellbeing support must be provided for principals, teachers and other staff members, recognising the growing complexity and workload associated with their roles.
- ‡ Discrete in-school time must be ring-fenced for teacher collaboration and planning, and the development of inclusive practices.
- ‡ Assistant principal posts must be provided to ensure that at least 40% of every teaching staff are promoted, thereby providing strong middle management structures in schools to support inclusion.
- ‡ A special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) must be appointed to every primary school in addition to the allocation of posts of responsibility.
- ‡ Allowances must be paid to all primary teachers working in both special schools and special classes.
- ‡ Allowances of school leaders must reflect all staff members for whom they are responsible.
- ‡ Increased special needs assistant (SNA) support must be provided to reflect the increasing complexity of enrolments and to ensure that all pupils who require SNA support have timely and adequate access to it. SNA support must also be provided to enable children in special classes to effectively integrate into mainstream classes.



## Therapeutic and counselling supports

- ⌘ Multi-disciplinary teams (including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychiatrists, psychologists and nursing staff) must be available to all schools, and children must have timely and appropriate access to the relevant professional supports. Special schools and schools with special classes must be guaranteed priority access to these professional supports.
- ⌘ The provision of National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) psychologists and SENOs must be increased until a case-load ratio of not more than 25 schools per professional is reached.
- ⌘ Play, art, music and other relevant therapies and in-school counselling must be provided where appropriate.

## Early intervention and transitions

- ⌘ A national early intervention programme to identify and support pupils with additional needs from early years must be developed, with all necessary supports continuing from primary education through to the end of tertiary education.
- ⌘ Protocols must be put in place around the transfer of information on SENs between pre-schools, primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools.
- ⌘ All students attending special schools must have the choice to complete the transition year programme and the Leaving Certificate programme.
- ⌘ A national framework for transitions, ensuring continuity of care and learning, must be developed, implemented and resourced.

## Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the INTO has long advocated for and been a champion of inclusion in the Irish education system. The reviewing of the *EPSEN Act* is welcomed, however, it must be followed up with meaningful actions. These actions must ensure that children with disabilities and additional needs, along with their families and school communities, have access to concrete, appropriate resources and support.

In order to fulfil such expectations, the DE, alongside the NCSE and the other relevant state agencies, need to offer increased financial and practical supports to schools. Meaningful and regular CPD for teachers and SNAs must be provided, alongside access to qualified therapists for the purpose of assessing pupils and supporting them and their families. Adequate time for school-based collaboration on individualised plans and sharing of good practice is a key requirement in the delivery of such an inclusive system.

The reduction to the EU average class sizes of 19 in mainstream schools, 15 in DEIS Band 1 schools, and significant class size reductions in special schools and special classes, will be crucial to maximise the potential time for pupil-teacher interaction in a more inclusive primary and special education system. Examination of the whole school structure and curriculum through the lens of diversity and universal design for learning would allow for meaningful learning opportunities for all.

Teachers are to the fore in making inclusion a reality in schools. The DE and the NCSE need to acknowledge and address their needs and experiences, including their health and safety needs. The huge volume of work that teachers do to ensure pupils with additional needs are educated to their full potential must be recognised. School staff must be supported with professional development opportunities, multi-disciplinary services, adequate resources and modern purpose-built facilities. For any policy of inclusion to be successful, school leaders and teachers in mainstream classes and special education settings must receive much more support than is currently being provided.



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