

New Circular Letter 0039/2025 – Approach and key measures to support the Forward Planning for special education provision for the 2026/2027 school year and beyond

Key requirements for schools in the short term.

1. Ongoing collaboration with the NCSE to open special classes and expand special school provision

The need for additional special class and special school capacity continues to increase year on year. The Department of Education and the NCSE envisage a need for at least another 400 new special classes and 300 special school places for the 2026/2027 school year.

The NCSE will continue to prioritise medium to larger primary schools (principal + 8 mainstream class teachers) with none or just 1 existing special class and post-primary schools with no special class to open new special classes for the 2026/2027 school year.

The NCSE will be visiting schools in relation to planning early in the new school year and the NCSE will be engaging closely with school patron bodies in this work as well.

The NCSE aim to sanction new special classes for the 2026/2027 school year by 31 December 2025.

2. Requirement to notify NCSE by 1 October 2025 where a child or young person requires a special class or special school place for the 2026/2027 school year

The date for parents to notify the NCSE where a child requires a special class or special school place for the following school year is being brought forward from 1 February to 1 October. This is to ensure that the NCSE have earlier clarity in terms of the level of need.

The NCSE will develop a communications strategy to make parents aware of this timeline. Schools who have existing children enrolled in mainstream classes who require a special class or special school place are asked to engage with the NCSE before 1 October also.

The NCSE will review reports and provide a letter to parents confirming that a child meets the eligibility criteria for a special class or special school.

3. Additional eligibility criteria for admission to all special classes and special schools

Following on from the NCSE letter referred to above, schools with special classes and special schools are required to add an additional eligibility criterion for admission to special classes in their school's admission policy. This relates to the need for applicants to be known to the NCSE and have the NCSE letter confirming their eligibility for the special class or special school.

Schools with special classes and special schools in collaboration with school patron bodies should review their admission policies to reflect this change.

This change to admission policies for schools with special classes can be incorporated into the reviews that patrons are undertaking on foot of the Ministers letter following the recent Inspectorate report which highlighted a range of concerns and potential barriers included in school admission policies relating to special class admission.