Special Education Needs Provision within Mainstream Education

Provision in Mainstream Education

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) provides for the education of children with special education needs through a number of support mechanisms depending on the child’s assessed disability.

Section 2 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 [1] requires that ... a child with special educational needs shall be educated in an inclusive environment with children who do not have such needs unless the nature or degree of those needs of the child is such that to do so would be inconsistent with the:

- Best interests of the child as determined in accordance with any assessment carried out under this Act,
- Effective provision of education for children with whom the child is to be educated.

In general, educational provision for children with special needs is made in:

- Special schools;
- Special classes attached to ordinary schools;
- Integrated settings in mainstream classes.

The nature and level of the educational response is based on the child’s professionally-assessed disability. The department's policy is to achieve as much integration as possible, as envisaged in Section 2 of the EPSEN Act. Where placement in an integrated setting is considered to be the appropriate response, provision will normally take the form of resource teaching or special needs assistant support, or both, depending on the pupil’s assessed level of need.

While the DES’ policy is to ensure the maximum possible integration of children with special needs into ordinary mainstream schools, students who have been assessed as having special educational needs have access to a range of special support services. The services range from special schools dedicated to particular disability groups, through special classes/units attached to ordinary schools, to placement on an integrated basis in ordinary schools with supports.

Children with more severe levels of disability may require placement in a special school or special class attached to a mainstream primary school. Each such facility is dedicated to a particular disability group and each operates at a specially reduced pupil teacher ratio. Pupils attending these facilities attract special rates of capitation funding and are entitled to avail of the special school
transport service and the school bus escort service (see Circular 0013/0014-2017 - Special Education Teaching Allocation - Primary Schools - Post Primary [2]).

Early Childhood

The guiding principle of mainstreaming public services for people with disabilities was adopted by the Government in 2000. The inclusion of young children with disabilities in pre-school settings is an integral part of the mainstreaming agenda.

Recent data from an Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire published by POBAL is based on respondents from early years services funded under the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010 capital funding, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) scheme and all services participating in the Early Childhood Care Education (ECCE) and Childcare Education & Training Supports (CETS) programmes. 3,401 questionnaires were completed representing an overall response rate of 78.1%.

Services were asked to provide details of the number of children with special needs (as diagnosed by the HSE) currently attending their services. In response to this question, 47% (1,587) of all services were found to have at least one child with a disability in attendance. A total of 4,679 children with disabilities of varying types were accessing services. The attendance is higher within the community sector, where 58% of all services report having at least one child with a disability attending, as compared with 41% of all private providers. The largest single category is that of “autism spectrum” disabilities; respondents reported a total of 1,302 children with this type of disability attending their service.

Within the school sector, special needs assistants (SNAs) are allocated by the Department of Education and Skills to special and mainstream schools to support pupils with disabilities who also have significant care needs. The current provision does not extend to children in Early Start Programme. The Department of Education and Skills also supports pre-school provision for children with disabilities in a number of areas, namely, autism pre-school classes, home tuition grants and visiting teacher services.

Outside of the school sector, support services for pre-school children are provided by the HSE. The Office of Disability and Mental Health in the Department of Health has overall responsibility for these services. The HSE provides grant aid support for children with disabilities in pre-school through two different arrangements; service level arrangements (SLAs) where the total grant to the agency (for all services) is in excess of €250k and grant aid agreements where the total grant to agencies is less than €250k.

The HSE funds pre-school provision for children with disabilities through the provision of:

- Day Special Pre Schools which are pre-schools run by statutory or voluntary agencies specifically for children with disabilities and through;

- Pre-school supports which refers to supports given to children with disabilities who are attending mainstream pre-school services.

The HSE also supports pre-school aged children (0-5 years) through the provision of multi-disciplinary early intervention services, which includes speech and language therapy, psychology, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, early intervention specialists, and elements of nursing and social work. A
proportion of the costs in the Multi-Disciplinary Early Intervention Services category also relates to supporting children in pre-schools. However, it is not possible to apportion these costs with any accuracy as the organisation of HSE multi-disciplinary services focuses on all young children in a catchment area and does not distinguish between children attending pre-schools and younger children (up to the age of three) and older children who do not attend pre-schools.

The provision of two year's free pre-school to all children has the potential to promote equality of opportunity at the most important developmental stage of children's lives. Special flexibility is allowed for children with special needs regarding the scheme’s age criterion and such children are allowed spread the provision over more than one year. Furthermore, all services participating in the scheme are required to make reasonable accommodation for children with special needs.

The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006 set out recommended adult/child ratios and maximum group sizes that should apply in full- and part-time day care, sessional and child minding services. Settings with children with special needs are not required to apply lower ratios.

Central to Síolta is the principle that pedagogy in early childhood must be supported within a flexible and dynamic framework that addresses the learning potential of the whole child and should be expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.

Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, was developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education on behalf of the DES. It was published in 2006, following a three-year developmental process. Since December 2008, the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the DES has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta with three distinct but interrelated elements: Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. The 12 Principles provide the overall vision of the Framework, while the 16 Standards and 75 Components allow for the practical application of this vision across all aspects of ECCE practice. The Components of Quality are further explained by a set of ‘Signposts for Reflection’ and ‘Think-abouts’ which are intended to support practitioners in early education settings to become aware of and critical of their practice. These core elements of Síolta are set out in detail in the Síolta user manual.

A visiting teacher service is in place to provide specialist teaching, information and guidance for learners who are visually impaired, deaf/hard of hearing in pre-school, primary and post-primary sectors. The service supports families and children of pre-school age.

Special Classes

Targeted early intervention is in place for children with autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) either through early intervention classes or a home-tuition scheme. In November 2007, throughout the country there were 277 classes for children with ASD, up from 90 such classes in 2000. 145 of these classes were attached to mainstream primary schools where children with ASDs may enrol from age three. 75 new classes were set up in 2007 alone. The NCSE continues to work with schools and parents in seeking to ensure that services are available locally for children.

Since 2011, the NCSE has increased the number of special classes by over 130% from 548 in 2011 to 1,456 across the country in October 2018, of which 1,192 are Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) special classes. This network includes 129 ASD early intervention classes, 742 primary ASD classes and 321 post-primary ASD classes in mainstream schools.

In 2017-18 there were 948 special classes in mainstream schools with 5,572 pupils. There were 37 special schools and 235 special classes attached to mainstream schools in Dublin. Of these, 17 were
ASD early intervention classes, 138 were primary ASD classes and 40 were post primary ASD classes. The number of ASD special classes in Co. Dublin has increased from 66 in 2011/2012 to 195 in 2017/2018. (Details of all special classes available on www.ncse.ie [9] in county order).

Each of these classes has a maximum of six children, with a specially trained teacher and a minimum two Special Needs Assistants (SNAs). More than 17,000 people work in schools on a daily basis with children who have special educational needs. This includes some 8,450 resource and learning support teachers helping children in primary and post primary schools.

In November 2018 there were 9,309 SNA Posts at primary level, 3,047 at post-primary level, 2,521 in special schools, making for a total of 14,877 allocated across the system, helping children during the school day, compared with just 300 less than twenty years ago.

The Government also funds early intervention classes for younger children with autism and the DES is working hard to expand the network of early intervention places. The Government believes that as each child with autism is unique, they should have access to a range of different approaches to meet their individual needs. Having services available in the local school where children can go with their siblings is important for the development of children with special educational needs and for the integration of children of all abilities in our schools to the benefit of all.

Providing an appropriate education for children with autism, through the primary and post primary school network, whether through placement in mainstream classes, in special classes or in special schools is a priority. The preferred multi-skills approach in providing education of children with autism is where teachers may draw down from a range of autism specific interventions including Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH), ABA (Applied Behavioural Analysis) and, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).

**Home Tuition**

The home tuition scheme provides a compensatory educational service for children:

- With a significant medical condition likely to cause major continuing disruption to school attendance;

- With special educational needs awaiting an educational placement, as an interim measure, including those with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), aged three upwards who cannot access a place in an ASD setting including an early intervention class. Home tuition funding is provided to children with ASD aged over 3 years of age where a school placement is not available;

- Children aged two-and-a-half to three who have been assessed as having ASD based on the DSM IV or ICD 10 criteria.

As home tuition takes place outside of school supervision it is necessary to ensure that the tuition provider is a fully qualified teacher who is registered with the Teaching Council of Ireland. If it is not possible to recruit a tuition provider who is a qualified and registered teacher then alternative qualifications may be acceptable as appropriate. The State aims over time to support a single early intervention setting structure for all children, including children with special educational needs.
Primary Schools

Funding for special education provision in 2018 will amount to some €1.75 billion, up 43% since 2011 and equivalent to 18.7% of the gross overall current allocation for education and training.

Children from age four may attend primary mainstream schools for eight years. In 2017-18, there were 3,246 aided primary schools and 563,459 pupils attending these schools – this includes mainstream and special schools. The pupil-teacher ratio for that academic year was 15.3. There are also 38 private primary schools.

Learners with special educational needs may be included in mainstream classes and receive additional teaching support and/or support from a special needs assistant (SNA). Additional teaching is provided through a withdrawal or in-class model of support. The class teacher is expected to maintain responsibility for the learner's education programme and to liaise with the support teacher regarding the individualised learning and teaching programme that is in place for the learner. Special needs assistants are allocated to assist teachers in meeting the care needs of learners and are assigned duties of a non-teaching nature. The average class size in mainstream primary schools is approximately twenty-four pupils, however classes can range from less than twenty-four up to twenty-nine pupils.

In September 2017, a new assessment was introduced to determine how special education teachers are allocated to mainstream schools. Under the new system, each school gets a single allocation of special education teachers. The number of special education teachers allocated to a school is determined by the size of the school and its educational profile. A school’s educational profile is broadly based on the number of students with complex special educational needs, the results of standardised tests and the social context of the school taking account of disadvantage and gender.

It is designed to give a fairer allocation of special education teachers to each school. It recognises that all schools need an allocation for special needs support, but provides a graduated allocation which takes into account the actual level of need in each school. Schools are now provided with the necessary resources in advance so that children with special educational needs can be enrolled into schools and access the additional teaching supports they need (Circular 0013/2017 [10]).

There is also a range of special class provision in mainstream primary schools that provides for learners with a diversity of special educational needs. Depending on the particular special educational needs of the learners, class size can range from six to nine pupils in the special classes. SNAs are also allocated to special classes to support students with significant care needs. There were 948 special classes in mainstream schools with approximately 5,572 pupils in the 2017-18 school year.

The Minister for education signed a Commencement Order on the October 04 2018 to bring a number of sections of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act, 2018 into operation. The Minister has a power, after a process of consultation with the NCSE, the board of management and the patron of the school, to compel a school to make additional provision for the education of children with special educational needs. This power came into effect on Monday 3rd December 2018.

Post-Primary Schools

Mainstream post-primary schools cater for learners aged from age twelve to eighteen years. In 2016-17, there were 711 aided post-primary schools catering for over 352,000 learners in total. This includes 52 fee-paying secondary schools with 25,282 pupils, which are also aided by the DES. Of the total, approximately 63,000 learners had special educational needs.

Classes at post-primary level are organised around particular subject areas or programmes that
learners are engaging with. Learners with special educational needs may be included in mainstream classes and receive additional teaching support from a support teacher and/or additional care support from a SNA. Additional teaching is provided through a withdrawal or in-class model of support. The subject teacher is expected to maintain responsibility for the learner’s progress in a particular subject area, in and to liaise with the support teacher regarding the learner’s individualised learning and teaching programme learner. Special needs assistants are allocated to assist teachers in meeting the care needs of learners, and are assigned duties of a non-teaching nature.

There is also a range of special class provision in mainstream post-primary schools that provides for learners with a diversity of special educational needs. Depending on the particular special educational needs of the learners, class size can range from six to eleven pupils in the special classes. Special needs assistants are also allocated to special classes in post-primary schools, to support students with special educational need who have significant care needs. There were approximately 150 special classes attached to post-primary schools in the 2017/2018 school year.

**Definition of the Target Group(s)**

Special educational needs are defined in Section 1 (1) of the EPSEN Act, 2004 which states that ‘special educational needs means in relation to a person, a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition and cognate words shall be construed accordingly.’ Section 52 of the EPSEN Act, amended Section 2 (1) of the Education Act, 1998 by substituting the above definition for the definition of disability detailed in the Education Act, 1998.

Resources are allocated to learners with special educational needs with reference to designated categories. This categorical system focuses the allocation of additional resources to learners within defined categories of special educational needs. A distinction is made between the allocation of resources for learners with high-incidence and low-incidence disabilities. Learners with high-incidence disabilities are provided with additional resources through a general allocation model, which provides for additional teaching resources to be allocated to schools without the requirement for an external assessment and places the focus on school-based inclusive interventions. High-incidence disabilities include specific learning difficulty and borderline/mild and mild general learning disability. Low-incidence disabilities include physical disability, deaf/hard of hearing, visual impairment, emotional disturbance, moderate general learning disability, severe or profound general learning disability, autistic spectrum disorders, special educational needs arising from an assessed syndrome such as Down syndrome, Tourette’s syndrome, specific speech and language disorder and multiple disabilities.

Special educational needs are also defined in Section 2 (1) Education Act, 1998 as ‘the educational needs of students who have a disability and the educational needs of exceptionally able students’. While learners with exceptional learning ability are not allocated additional teaching resources, it is expected that curriculum differentiation by the class teacher at both primary and post-primary levels is a key feature of educational provision for these learners and that attention is directed to ensuring that these learners are provided with learning and teaching opportunities that optimise their full potential.

**Specific Support Measures**

Considerable resources have been allocated to support the inclusion of learners with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary education. 12,501 posts were allocated to schools for Resource Teaching and Learning support for the 2016/17 school year.
In November 2018, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) was in a position to announce that a total of 3,700 schools in both sectors had been allocated resource teachers, and that the total number of teachers involved in broad resource and learning support work would be 9,950 for the 2012-13 school year. The appointment of a total of 14,877 allocated SNAs had also been approved.

Where special classes are a feature of provision in mainstream schools, it is expected that the maximum inclusion of learners with their mainstream peers is facilitated. Special classes provide for learners with both high-incidence and low-incidence disabilities, and are established in schools based on an identified local need.

**Continuing Professional Development**

The DES provides for a range of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes to develop teachers’ knowledge and understanding in relation to special education. These programmes range from post-graduate programmes in third-level institutions to programmes provided by the Special Education Support Service (SESS). The SESS, as a CPD support service for teachers aimed to support the quality of learning and teaching in relation to special educational provision. The service co-ordinated, developed and delivered a range of professional development initiatives and support structures for school personnel working with students with special educational needs in mainstream primary and post-primary schools, special schools and special classes.

In 2017, the SESS transferred from the DES to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and joined with the services already being provided by NCSE’s SENOs and administrative staff to form a new NCSE Support Service. This new service aims to develop schools’ capacity to include students with special educational needs and to promote a continuum of educational provision which is inclusive and responsive.

From March 2017, the NCSE has responsibility for providing CPD and support for teachers in the area of special educational needs (SEN) to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in relation to SEN provision (formerly provided directly through the SESS), and for supporting the introduction of the new model of resource teaching allocation to schools and to develop capacity to meet the needs of students with SEN. A range of material is also available on the SESS website to assist teachers in meeting the learning and teaching needs of learners with special educational needs.

The Visiting Teacher Service for Children who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and Children who are Blind/Visually Impaired (VTHVI) also transferred to the NCSE in 2017.

The NCSE aims to support the professional development needs of teachers and schools in relation to the teaching of children with special needs, in as flexible a way as possible. Other NCSE supports for professional development include: School-Based Primary and Post-Primary Seminars, NCSE Designed and Delivered Seminars [Primary] [Post-Primary], NCSE Supported Courses, NCSE Supported Online Courses, NCSE eLearning, NCSE Book Borrowing Online, Middletown Centre for Autism Courses and Cross Border Professional Exchange Programme (see: [https://www.sess.ie/professional-development](https://www.sess.ie/professional-development[11]).

Psychological assessment of children and young people and professional support for teachers and schools is provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). This body was established in September 1999 and provides a service to primary, post-primary and some special schools.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) was established under the Education Act, 1998 to advise the Minister in relation to the education of all learners. The NCCA has developed
suites of curriculum Guidelines for Teachers of Students with mild and general learning disabilities, which are designed to assist special school, primary and post-primary teachers in mediating the curriculum for learners with special educational needs.

These documents are designed to enable students with mild general learning disabilities to access all subjects as presented in the Primary School Curriculum. In presenting these guidelines, recognition is given to the fact that the aims and objectives of the guidelines are the same as those outlined in the Primary School Curriculum. Given the breadth of the subject matter, differentiation may be necessary at many levels. The primary school SESE curriculum, however, remains the curriculum statement for this group of students and these guidelines are intended as a supplement to it rather than a replacement for it. These guidelines therefore should be read in conjunction with the primary school SESE curriculum.

While there is not, as yet cross-sectoral nationwide standardised testing in place to evaluate the progress of learners with special educational needs through education, individual schools engage in their own assessment processes, which may include the use of teacher-devised tests and tasks, teacher-observation, norm-referenced tests, criterion-referenced tests and portfolio assessments. In addition, as part of the new National Literacy and Numeracy strategy primary schools are required to implement standardised testing in English reading and Mathematics during the period May/June for all students in 2nd, 4th and 6th classes with effect from 2012 onwards (DES, Circular 0018/2012). Primary schools are required to report aggregate standardised test results to the DES once annually. An online system to enable schools to upload their standardised test data is available via Easinet. Data on student achievement are essential to inform national education policy and to identify ways of improving the performance of the education system.

At post-primary level, students with special educational needs may engage with a range of certified programmes in accordance with their needs and abilities. These programmes include the Junior Certificate and the Junior Certificate School Programme following three years at post-primary. Learners with special educational needs may engage with the Leaving Certificate, the LCA, the LCVP and the Further Education and Training Awards in their final two-three years at post-primary level. None of these certified programmes are specifically designed for learners with special educational needs. However reasonable accommodation measures are available if appropriate for learners through the provision of a scribe or increased time-allocation to complete a state examination. From 2014, the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy provides for standardised testing for students in second year in post-primary schools in English reading and mathematics in all schools and, in addition, in Irish reading in Irish-medium schools.

The Inspectorate of the DES also has a role in evaluating the quality of provision for all learners, including learners with special educational needs. The functions of the Inspectorate are detailed in Section XIII of the Education Act, 1998. These functions include providing support and advice to schools, evaluating the organisation and operation of schools and the quality and effectiveness of the education provided, including the quality of teaching and learning, the effectiveness of individual teachers, assessing the implementation of regulations made by the Minister and reporting to the Minister, board of management, patron, parents and teachers as appropriate.

The DES invests considerably in school buildings through providing funding for alterations to existing facilities or through building new structures. The specific needs of learners with special educational needs are considered and alterations/new structures are designed to accommodate the particular needs of the learners that are enrolled in the school.

School transport is provided for by the DES to allow learners with special educational needs to attend the nearest appropriate placement that can be resourced. The purpose of the DES’s school transport
scheme for children with special educational needs is, having regard to the available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability. In general, these children are eligible for school transport if they are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school or unit that is or can be resourced to meet their special educational needs under the Department’s criteria. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of special educational needs organisers (SENOs).

Bus Éireann (the State public transport operator) operates the school transport service on behalf of the department. The school transport service may not be available in all areas. Where the transport cannot be provided, students may be eligible for a Special Transport Grant to help with the cost of making private transport arrangements. Applications can be made to the department by the Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) to employ an escort to accompany a child, if the child’s care and safety needs require that support. Additionally, where necessary, adjustments are made to vehicles to accommodate the needs of learners with physical disabilities.

Spending on special needs transport - which often includes bus escorts or taxis for students - has jumped from €64 million to €92 million between 2013/2014 and 2017/2018. The costs have been rising due mainly to an increase in the number of eligible children with special needs who require transport.

The cost for the provision of school transport services in 2017 was approximately €190 million. This included the cost of direct transport services, grant payments, funding to schools for the employment of escorts to accompany children with special educational needs whose care and safety needs were such as to require the support of an escort.

In 2017-18, 117,000 children including 12,700 children with special educational needs were transported in approximately 4,500 vehicles covering over 100 million kilometres over the course of the year.

The number of children availing of the special educational needs scheme has increased by 3,512, from more than 9,000 in 2013-2014 to almost 13,000 in 2017-1208, and the overall costs of the scheme, including grants, payments to contractors and funding for school transport escorts, has risen by over €27 million, from €64 million to almost €91 million over the same period.
Links