

# NCSE Consultations Regarding Special Schools & Classes

A Submission from AsIAM



## Introduction

AsIAM welcomes the opportunity to take part in this public consultation on special schools and classes.

We share the vision outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), whereby State Parties commit to ensure “*an inclusive education system at all levels and lifelong learning directed to*” the development and full participation of citizens living with disabilities in wider society.<sup>1</sup> We believe that is therefore a role for these institutions to play within our education system amidst this context. The rights, opportunities and supports for Irish pupils with special educational needs (SENs) to partake in mainstream settings has been enshrined since the Education for Special Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004. Indeed, most autistic pupils are educated alongside their neurotypical peers, with as many as one in sixty-five school-aged children in mainstream schools are estimated to be somewhere on the autism spectrum.<sup>2</sup>

In recognising the present need for special schools and classes, we must also challenge ourselves to review the barriers that remain in accessing mainstream education and how these can be removed. There is a fundamental need to recognise the diversity within the autism spectrum. It impacts different people, to differing degrees at differing times. There are many autistic pupils who may manage their challenges, personal as well as educational, very independently. Equally, there are those who will struggle moreso and will need more intensive, long-term supports throughout their lives, in school and adulthood. Co-occurring diagnoses, such as intellectual, physical or sensory disabilities,

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. 24:1 (b). Online. Available at: [http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convention\\_accessible\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convention_accessible_pdf.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> National Council for Special Education. (July 2016). *NCSE's Policy Advice on Supporting Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Schools*. Online. Available at: [http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/3\\_NCSE-Supporting-Students-with-ASD-Guide.pdf](http://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/3_NCSE-Supporting-Students-with-ASD-Guide.pdf).

or emotional and behavioural conditions, can add to the present need for specialised settings or professionals.

Special schools and classes presently can provide opportunities and resources otherwise unavailable in mainstream; specialised interventions, trained professionals and assistive equipment tailored for pupils' individual uses are all designed to help those with more complex needs achieve a higher level of personal self-sufficiency and success both in school and in the wider community. However, the Constitution recognises parents as the primary educators<sup>3</sup> while the UNCRPD emphasises the importance of the voice of people with disabilities. To that end, the selection of the most suitable school placement should be a matter for autistic students and their parents. Where schools cannot presently meet the needs of a student, they should have to prove they have exhausted all options and set out a timeframe for rectifying these issues prior to recommending an alternative school placement.

AsIAM hopes that this policy review begins a new conversation on special education in Ireland, as we explore different ways of how we can bring the issue of meaningful inclusion and quality learning for all our pupils.

## Key Findings

We commissioned a survey among stakeholders rights across school communities in the country. In doing so, we aimed to compile an informed picture of the situation facing families and professionals on a national level.

The questionnaire was conducted online through SurveyMonkey, whereby members of the public were asked their thoughts on a variety of issues outlined within the consultation. These ranged from whether or not to retain special schools and classes, what their admission criteria should specify, how and where should a school/class be set up as well as who might be involved in their staffing.

Stakeholders identified and engaged with throughout the process were chiefly composed of autistic pupils themselves, their family members, and teaching professionals working with pupils on the spectrum.<sup>4</sup>

We found that:

- 96% said that Special Schools and Special Classes should continue to be included as part of the continuum of provision;
- 79% said that the DES should not abolish Special Schools and Classes and merge their pupils into mainstream settings;
- 92% said that there should be a legal obligation be placed on schools to plan and actively implement Support Plans for their autistic pupils;
- 96% said that pupils should be more actively involved in the planning of their education alongside their families and teachers;

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<sup>3</sup> *Bunreacht na hÉireann* (Constitution of Ireland, enacted 1937). Article 42.1 (on Education)

<sup>4</sup> AsIAM. "NCSE Policy on Special Schools/Classes Survey." Questionnaire. Online. December 2018.

- 93% said that mainstream schools should be compelled to show that they have explored all options and reasonable accommodations available to them before recommending that an autistic pupil be reallocated to a special school;
- 92% said that School Management Boards should have a quota of at least one position where the individual possesses a background in special education;
- 97% said that schools should be consulting with outside expertise (i.e., therapeutic professionals, training and research organisations, advocacy groups, etc.) when reviewing autistic pupils' needs during the academic year;
- 59% said that the recommendations from outside expertise should be legally binding for educational professionals to carry out for their autistic pupils;
- 99% said that additional compulsory modules on special education should be included within Initial Teacher Training;
  - 96% went on to say that outside expertise from the disability sector and autism community should be involved in developing and facilitating such training;
- 99% said that the Teaching Council of Ireland should partner with outside expertise when developing additional resources and CPD courses;
- 79% do not feel that teachers and clinicians work closely enough in the interests of meeting autistic pupils' needs;
- 72% do not believe that Special Educational Needs Organisers are held accountable enough in explaining their decisions and answering complaints to the families of autistic pupils;
- The biggest gaps in the continuum of provision were, in order:
  - Core Teacher Training – 30%
  - Funding for adequate facilities and learning equipment – 21%
  - Interprofessional thinking and collaboration – 20%
  - Therapeutic services – 18%
  - School Governance – 7%
  - Support for home-schooled autistic pupils and those being excluded – 3%

## Maintaining our Special Schools & Autism Classes

A core question underpinning the NCSE's consultation asks whether we should continue to have special schools and classes as part of our education system's continuum of provision.

From the outset, it is crucial to understand and emphasise the autism spectrum's neurodiversity. No two autistic people will experience the same differences and challenges to the same degree. Many autistic children are already educated within mainstream settings alongside their neurotypical peers. They are usually supported by a resource teacher and may, depending on their differences, move from a special class to mainstream or vice versa. For those whose needs may be more complex, however, specialised settings may be more conducive to their personal development.

AsIAM firmly believes in keeping special classes and special schools as distinct from mainstream settings. Special Schools have played a vital role in educating autistic pupils

with additional needs. As our understanding of the condition grows, we have begun to see more and more children receiving earlier diagnoses. It has only followed that, accordingly, supply and demand for better services from has also risen. Crucial to meeting that demand is the availability of quality and choice for autistic pupils and their families.

We recognise that change is needed within the provision of services for autistic pupils learning within these settings, but strongly cautions against viewing the issue in isolation. Effectively tackling identified shortcomings necessitates as broad an examination of the situation as possible, so that strategies may be developed, complimenting and enriching one another's aims as they work towards a shared goal.

## Raising Autism Awareness during Teacher Training

An honest appraisal of how we train and equip our teachers is, in AsIAM's view, a crucial step forward in delivering meaningful change to how autistic pupils are supported throughout their school years.

From the outset, it must be noted, that Ireland's education system regularly ranks as one of the most reputable in international league tables. Irish students are world-class performers across several key areas, namely in core subjects such as mathematics, reading and science<sup>5</sup>, indicating a strong foundation provided in no small part by their teachers. Welcome developments, to be sure, and a credit to the quality of academic provision embedded within the initial teacher education (ITE) framework.

There nonetheless exist very real gaps around how inclusive and special education is introduced and taught within wider teacher training in Ireland. Whilst various pieces of legislation passed in recent years have attempted to format practical supports and entitlements for autistic pupils in-school, comparatively few of these measures have directly dealt with *how* and *to what extent* teachers are initially trained to think about and engage with autism. Indeed, recent action from the ASTI and TUI, whereby directives have been issued advising their memberships against implementing IEPs<sup>6</sup>, highlights the importance of successful training in inclusive education.

AsIAM calls for a holistic review of how we teach our teaching professionals so that they have more of a stake and say in autistic pupil's development. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) needs to be reassessed to give a greater emphasis in awareness about autism as a difference and of best practices in how to address in-classroom obstacles arising from challenges linked to the condition.

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<sup>5</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED). (2015). *PISA 2015 Results (Volume I): Excellence and Equity in Education Overview: Excellence and Equity in Education*. Pg 44. Online. Accessed: December 2018. Available at: [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-i/overview-excellence-and-equity-in-education\\_9789264266490-5-en#page12](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-i/overview-excellence-and-equity-in-education_9789264266490-5-en#page12).

<sup>6</sup> Donnelly, Katherine. "Anger at Teachers' Unions over Advice on Special Needs." *Irish Independent*. 20th December 2018. Online. Available at: <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/anger-at-teachers-unions-over-advice-on-special-needs-37643534.html>.

## Suggestions

- Build on the model of inclusion set out in the NCSE guidelines for educating autistic pupils, along with wider ambitions to involve families and wider stakeholders;
- Explore how the contents of existing Special and Inclusive Education modules can be transferred across the broader continuum of ITE and spread over the four-year period;
- Instill a culture of responsibility from ITE's outset, ensuring that student teachers are aware of what procedures are in place for reporting exclusion and what bodies are responsible for holding schools to account in educating and supporting autistic pupils;
- Ensure that at least one placement during ITE is conducted within either a special school or a special class attached to a mainstream environment, obligating hosts to provide the necessary tools for student teachers to meaningfully engage with pupils, receive practical advice from experienced educators working there, and self-evaluate;
- Augment the existing continuum of CPD courses with new content, specifically aimed at informing teaching professionals about autism and what best practices exist for engaging autistic pupils' needs at different stages in-class;
- Collaborate with like-minded professionals and organisations, such as charities and advocacy groups, in developing autism-specific CDP courses for inclusive education;
- Encourage staff to make use of existing resources on autism, including AsIAM's AsYouCan guides and School Workshops, as well as training courses delivered by organisations such as the Middletown Centre for Autism;
- Establish local 'hubs' or best practice associations through the NCSE Special Education Support Service, whereby educators, regardless of their specialty or tenure, may practically learn from and support one another through exchange of ideas and training.

## Supporting Transitions from Primary to Post-Primary

Transitioning is a major challenge for autistic people, at any stage, to manage. School is no different, as pupils begin to prepare for their entry into First Year from Sixth Class.

Structurally speaking, there is little in place within Ireland's education system to help prepare autistic pupils transition and integrate into post-primary settings. School Support Plans may be individually adapted to meet the challenges arising from what can be a stressful in a pupil's development, yet there is no explicit obligation on schools to actively draft or implement such a strategy.

Moreover, as AsIAM have stressed in the past<sup>7</sup>, secondary schools are often at a financial disadvantage compared to primary when attempting to include and meet their autistic pupils' needs - those incoming as well as those already enrolled. Secondary schools, like primary, for instance, may apply for a once-off set-up grant of €6,500 from the DES to cover the cost of furniture and general equipment in an autism class; yet unlike primary schools, they are not eligible to apply for an enhanced level of capitation grant per pupil enrolled in the autism class. Adequate autism awareness among professionals working at this level is especially crucial, given the scale and frequency of changes occurring at this stage in pupils' lives.

AsIAM believe that the solution is twofold; firstly, it must fully acknowledge the disproportionate levels of support allocated between the two settings. Secondly, it must take a holistic and long-term view when addressing the problem, placing sufficient resources and strategies in both areas so that they might compliment one another's shared goal of implementing a successful transition to a new chapter in a pupil's life.

We therefore recommend the following actions:

- Outline the importance of transition during ITE and CPD, so that professionals working at both primary and post-primary level are appropriately informed of the process and what best practices can be implemented when preparing autistic pupils;
- Provide transition training during Sixth Class, explaining the differences between the two levels in terms of routine, curriculum, workload, what supports are available and possible sensory challenges;
- Embed transition and integration as core benchmarks within a School Support Plan's checklist for First Year pupils, with a long-term view on tackling areas of personal development among stakeholders;
- Actively engage with families at regular intervals throughout First Year, providing up-to-date information on what supports the school offers and what entitlements are available in terms of assistive technology and support schemes.

## Key Recommendations

- **Maintain the distinction between special schools and mainstream schools;**
- 'Autism-proof' codes of behaviour within schools and the physical layouts of their classrooms to allow for meeting pupils' sensory processing needs;
- Future training for educational professionals at all levels must include detailed information around autism awareness and best practices into their courses' core content;
- **Schools must explore all options available to them** before recommending that autistic pupils sitting in a mainstream setting with overly complex should be transferred to a special school;

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<sup>7</sup> Holland, Kitty. "Hundreds of Autistic Teenagers in 'Inappropriate' Schools." *The Irish Times*. 31st August 2018. Online. Accessed: December 2018. Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/hundreds-of-autistic-teenagers-in-inappropriate-schools-1.3613053>.

- Obligate primary and post-primary mainstream schools to develop and implement Student Support Files (SSFs) for autistic pupils;
- Any development for future special classes and or schools from NCSE and DES should be a **consultative and holistic undertaking**, involving stakeholders from right across the school community. These include the pupils themselves, families, teaching staff, educational psychologists, SENOs, and boards of management members;
- All decision-making bodies and processes around pupils' educational and personal development **must involve students and their families**.